

Out of the depths I cry

The deep distress we sense as we hear Psalm 130 read has, paradoxically perhaps, given great hope to millions down the years. No matter how deep we have sunk, no matter just how bad a situation appears, the Psalms have been there before us. Not only do they encourage us to believe that we've not completely lost our way; more importantly they give us words so that, when our own words fail to do justice to what we're feeling, the words of the Psalms will do instead.

Over the years, and more specifically on quiet days or retreats, I've had a go at writing my own version of a Psalm. Using the Psalmist's framework, I can then express how I'm truly feeling, and it really helps. So much so, that I strongly commend this practice to you, particularly if you enjoy playing around with words. As an encouragement, I thought I might share with you my own version of Psalm 130:

Lord, help! I'm at my wit's end and I've nowhere else to turn.

Lord, are you even listening? Because if you are, I need you to listen hard. Listen to my cries for help.

If you, Lord, were keeping a checklist of the times we mess up, would any of us stand a chance?

But forgiveness runs through you like a stick of rock, and that's why I can't help but put my trust in you, why I can't help but worship you.

All my life I've prayed.

What else can I do but pray and wait for what you'll say or do.

My soul waits in hope day after day, more than those who lie awake through the night watching for the clock to signal morning.

We must all put our hope in you.

For with you there is love.

With you there is forgiveness.

With you there is transformation.

With you there is hope.

With you there is life everlasting.

There's no doubt about this.

And here's the best part – this love, this forgiveness, this transformation, this hope and life everlasting – it's for all your children.

No ifs, no buts. It's for all.

Where do I turn? I turn to you.

The Psalmist in Psalm 130, like so many other psalms, doesn't hide. There's no point pretending, putting a brave face on it before God. Verse 1 begins with the words *'Out of the depths'*, which for me suggests being at our wit's end, and that's how it is like for *all* of us some of the time, and for some of us most of the time. Why not tell it how it is rather than pretending that everything is OK? I know that some of you come into church on a Sunday morning and when asked *'How are you?'* say *'I'm fine'* when you're really not. Or, if you *do* say that things are difficult, you then apologise for doing so. Please don't; we need to be honest when we're in the depths.

In our gospel reading, Mary and Martha make no attempt to hide their despair at the loss of their brother Lazarus. We read in verse 3 of our passage from chapter 11 of John's gospel that the sisters had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus, their brother and a much loved friend of Jesus, was seriously ill. The message was brief: *'Lord, the one you love is sick.'* The expectation is clear – that Jesus will come, and in his coming, the outcome they fear will be different. But Jesus stays where he is for a further two days; he does not rush and we read this this is part of a bigger plan. *'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,'* he tells his disciples, *'but I am going there to wake him up.'* When he realises that they think Jesus was speaking of natural sleep, he tells them plainly, *'Lazarus is dead.'* Indeed, by the time Jesus and the disciples arrive, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.

On approaching Bethany, we read that Martha hears that Jesus was close by, and she runs to meet him with the words, *'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'* She can't stop blame bubbling up – she might also have said, *'Why didn't you come? Couldn't you have kept him alive?'* And when she goes and gets her sister, Mary's words to Jesus are the same: *'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'* There is no cloaking their feelings; they tell it how it is. And we then see Jesus enter into the grief at the loss of his friend in what is the shortest verse in the Bible: *'Jesus wept.'* He joins the sisters in shared weeping, in being with them at the tomb, and in praying for them. Their shared distress at the loss of a loved one is natural, and one that most of us can recognise and understand. Because most of us have been there.

In Psalm 130 however, the distress expressed by the poet is compounded because he has a sense that somehow the situation he is in is his own fault. When disaster strikes and it's someone else's fault, we can gain some relief by blaming them, perhaps hoping for justice. But when it's our own fault, even in part, the blame turns back on us. And that is the road to the deepest depths of all, where we're not only miserable but feel guilty. The theologian Tom Wright, reflecting on this passage, writes that *'Depression often takes the form of putting ourselves on trial and acting as judge, jury and chief prosecution witness all rolled into one. We lock ourselves in the dungeon of our own misery and throw away the key.'*

It is out of that sense of helpless and hopeless sadness that the poem cries out: Lord, hear my voice! If you keep a record of wrongdoing, we'd all be in deep trouble; but what you offer is forgiveness! That's why we worship you! The news of forgiveness, of a free pardon, is the best news of all. The lock is broken; the prison door stands open; we're free to go.

But it hasn't happened yet. The Psalm ends with redemption, forgiveness, still in the future. Yet, the strong affirmation of God's forgiving kindness in verse 4: *'But with you there is forgiveness'* is the anchor which then, despite all, holds us upright. Then it's a matter of hope and patience: *'waiting'*, repeated three times in verses 5 and 6, is where it's at. 'Lord, give me patience,' says the T-shirt, 'and I want it right now!' But what matters here is the waiting, the settled concentration on God's word which alone assures us that there is hope because God is gracious.

Even though Lazarus was dead, Martha expresses hope. After rebuking Jesus for not having been there, she says these words: *'But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.'* And Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again. She thinks he's referring to the end times and is completely unprepared for what happens next, that her brother is literally raised from the dead. It's no surprise then that this passage can be a difficult one for us to come to terms with. It's not within our experience for people to come back to life after they have been dead for four days.

So, we may have different responses to this story. Do we believe it at face value, or do we seek other explanations? A more important consideration, perhaps, is how John uses it to emphasise the transformation that Jesus can bring – as we might ask also of other 'signs' that Jesus performed, such as turning water into wine or multiplying loaves and fishes.

In this story, Jesus is no outsider. He is fully involved with the sadness of the situation; the text tells us that he was deeply moved and wept. What we learn is that when Jesus offers us transformation, he comes beside us as a friend who knows all about our struggles.

As we journey through Lent, all sorts of things may have come up to test us, to make us despair. There is still some way to go, but we know who it is we're following, who it is that is alongside us. By the end of Psalm 130, the poet is strong enough to commend to the whole nation the path of patience he himself is treading. *'O Israel, hope in the Lord; with the Lord there is steadfast love; he has great power to redeem.'* He doesn't say what form the rescue will take. He only knows who it is that will provide it.

And thousands of years later, as we read the Psalms, we have the opportunity to make them our own, either through Biblical translations or our own re-working of them. But please do use them. Use them when your own words fail. But, more importantly, use them to remind you of the hope that there is in the Lord.

For with the Lord there is love.

With the Lord there is forgiveness.

With the Lord there is transformation.

With the Lord there is hope.

With the Lord there is life everlasting.

Amen.