

## Pain, prayer, praise - 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*Genesis 22:1–14, Psalm 13, Matthew 10:40–42*

The words of the gospel reading from Matthew are encouraging, telling the disciples that all who welcome them and treat them well are doing so as if they welcome Christ. In effect, the disciples are presenting the face and message and presence of Christ to these people. However, the warm glow of this passage follows a longer sending into the world, with words of warning that the disciples' welcome will be very mixed, and they may well meet with rejection, betrayal and imprisonment. Nevertheless, in the words of Matthew 10: 39b, immediately before today's reading, *Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it*. This is an assurance of unfailing love and an invitation to trust in that love, no matter what the difficulties.

The assurance of God's love in difficult circumstances is a message we need to hear over and over again. Jesus' disciples would have been familiar with Psalm 13, which we heard today. This psalm can also speak powerfully to us, and encourage us in difficult circumstances. The simple structure of Psalm 13 relates closely to our lives, particularly those times when we walk in the wilderness or even experience the dark night of the soul.

Psalm 13 has 2 verses that are a real cry from the heart:

*<sup>1</sup> How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*<sup>2</sup> How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?*

*How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

We have all had times in our lives when the world is a bleak place indeed. It may be internally bleak or we may find ourselves in bleak circumstances. I believe that no matter what our circumstances, we are not alone. We walk in the love of God and, as it says in our parish mission statement, we *do* walk together with Jesus.

Nevertheless, there may be times when we feel truly alone and we may even wonder where God is.

In Hebrew, repetition is often used to add emphasis. In verse 1 the phrase *how long* is used twice, each time adding to the picture of wretchedness. The psalmist first addresses God directly and asks how long God will forget him. Then, God is described as even more distant – not just forgetful but deliberately turning away. The friends who turn away from us hurt us even more deeply than those who simply forget or are not mindful of us.

Then in verse 2 the psalmist again repeatedly cries *how long*. We see the internal conflict, the wrestling with troublesome thoughts and feeling of being overwhelmed by sorrow day after day. And finally, the psalmist is surrounded by mocking foes, the kind who rejoice when we fall. Bad enough to fall but to have that fall celebrated by others increases the pain.

The psalmist laments from a place of pain, feeling abandoned by God, tormented by his own thoughts and feelings, and surrounded by those who would rejoice in triumphing over him. This is his starting place.

How do you climb out of such a deep place? Well, in verses 3 and 4 we have 2 verses of prayer:

<sup>3</sup> *Look on me and answer, LORD my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,  
<sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

The psalmist turns to God, even though he is feeling abandoned by God. We should note that there is a measure of hope already present in the first 2 verses. When we address God, we expect that God hears us. When we cry, *how long*, we are anticipating an end to suffering and sorrow. Things may be bleak but they will not be that way for ever.

God is asked to *look, answer, and give light*. In essence, God is asked to take away the feelings of abandonment, of isolation and of darkness. We, like the psalmist, want to walk in the light of the knowledge and love of God. We want to know that we are safe and loved, no matter what our circumstances.

And in verses 5 and 6 the psalmist praises God in full trust and confidence that this is so. These verses affirm trust and faithfulness.

*<sup>5</sup> But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
<sup>6</sup> I will sing the LORD's praise,  
for he has been good to me.*

Verse 5 says *I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation*. We can trust in God's unfailing love, just as Abraham did. Abraham was asked to do something truly terrifying – to kill his long awaited and much loved only son. Who could contemplate such a dreadful thing, let alone set out to do it. Yet Abraham trusted in God and in God's promise that he would be the father of many nations. He did not know whether Isaac would die but there would be other sons, or whether God would somehow intervene. But he did trust that he must be faithful and do what God commanded.

Finally verse 6 of the psalm gives a foundation for that kind of trust and for praising God. *I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me*. I find that verse immensely relevant and comforting. There are mountains and valleys in life and when we are deep in the shadows, we can remember the experiences of the peaks. God has been good to me in so many ways and at so many times, from the small blessings of life to the mighty gift of salvation. When I am walking in the wilderness or in the dark places, the memory of God's goodness is to me an assurance of God's unfailing love and is a strong foundation for trusting in a future where, in the words of Julian of Norwich, *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well*.

We live in an imperfect world, a world in which we *will* find fear, loneliness, sickness, anxiety, grief, and many other troubles. But we are not alone or abandoned in our distress. Our faithfulness is shown in our willingness to trust and obey, despite our circumstances.

*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. (John 14: 15 - 18)*

Michael K. Marsh, a priest of the Episcopal Church serving a parish in the Diocese of West Texas, says, *Keeping the commandments is our access to Jesus' promise that we will not be left orphaned. Keeping the commandments does not make Jesus present to us. It makes us present to the already ongoing reality of Jesus' presence. The commandments do not earn us Jesus' love they reveal our love for him, a love that originates in his abiding love and presence within us.* (<http://interruptingthesilence.com/2011/05/30/i-will-not-leave-you-orphaned-a-sermon-on-john-1415-21-easter-6a/>)

Whenever you feel, like the psalmist, that you may be forgotten, abandoned, or lost in the darkness, remember the disciples. They were faithful during Jesus' ministry then saw him crucified. They met their resurrected Lord, then had him leave them to go to the Father. Ultimately, they received the amazing gift of the Holy Spirit, and were empowered to take the love of God out into the world.

The news of God's love spread so far that it even found us. So we also can respond with prayer and with praise and say with the psalmist:

*I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.*