**United Lent Service 28th February 2016**

**Psalm 13**

As you know I’m a northerner. Born in Burnley Lancashire from respectable working class background, but working class nether the less. Not too many airs and graces, flowery words and etiquette. If you were upset you spat it out immediately. ‘Oi you, what do you think you’re playing at….’ Sometimes it would lead to a fight but more often than not the outburst would lance the boil of anger and get it out of the system.

Reading Psalm 13, I’m sure it was written by a northerner. There is no introduction. No pious words to get the ear of the Almighty:

‘O heavenly Father, your ways are mysterious and far beyond our imagining, yet you are loving and forgiving. However I’m going through a bit of a bad time and I do feel a little let down: but I’m sure it’s not your fault but mine, please forgive me for mentioning this, but I do wonder if you could help me.’

There’s none of that. That is too respectable; too middle class.

This Psalm just goes for the jugular from the off. ‘Oi you what do you think you’re playing at….. How Long! How Long! Look upon me and answer!

There is anger and frustration, dejection and despair in there and it’s all upfront and transparent.

Feel the pain:

How long until I get a job and feel valued

How long until he is freed of his addiction

How long unitl I can get out of this depression

How long do I have to care for this person

How long before I get justice

How long before the war stops and we can return home

How long must I suffer racism or bulleying, or intimidation.

Do you not care God? Have you forgotten me. Are you hiding from me?

The Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann categories the psalms in three ways. Psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation and psalms of reorientation.

Human life he says consists in different seasons: There is the satisfied season of wellbeing that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing. Matching this are psalms of orientation: ways in which joy, delight, goodness, coherence and the reliability of God, God’s creation and God’s governing law is articulated.

Human life also consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity and hatred. Matching this are the psalms of disorientation, poems and speech forms that match the season in its ragged painful disarray. This speech, the lament, has a recognizable shape that permits the extravagance and abrasiveness needed for the experience.

Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair. Where there was only darkness now there is a shaft of light. Corresponding to this are the psalms of re-orientation which speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new.

I’ve met and spent time with Walter Brueggemann and I know he has had a couple of breakdowns in his life and has had therapy, so he speaks with personal awareness of the seasons of faith. For Brueggemann, the move of the seasons is transformational not developmental: that is the move is never obvious, easy or natural. It is always in pain and surprise and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been made.

The psalms express our life of faith particularly in the two decisive moves of faith: out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation. Then the other move from a context of disorientation to a new orientation : a new coherence just when we thought all was lost. Just when we thought we would succumb to despair and darkness – new light dawns, a new hope begins.

This psalm is a psalm of disorientation according to Brueggemann. It is a personal lament. Something is amiss in the relationship between the writer and God. The psalm begins with four questions all beginning ‘How Long?’ The questions are addressed to God. They are rhetorical questions that do not seek an answer. Instead they’re statements that describe this situation of disorientation and intend to fix the blame firmly on God. ‘Oi you what do you think you’re playing at – how long?

The trouble is the absence of God: summed up in the words ‘forget’ and ‘hide’. The derivative trouble is pain, sorrow, and worst of all the awareness that enemies prevail. Thus the crisis in the relationship with God is at the bottom of the external problems of the troubles of the world. The speaker is suggesting that because of God’s absence all these troubles have happened.

The speech is not reasoned. It is a barrage of someone in a sore condition who wants to get it off their chest.

I’m sure all the clergy will recall moments of being on the end of a barrage: Where was God when my baby died? How long must this suffering go on? Does God not care about us that we seem to go from one tragedy to the next. How Long??

By verse three the Lord is named a second time. Here, there is time for an address of intimacy: ‘O Lord MY God’. It is as though this initial onslaught, the pent up rage is released, and note there is opportunity to acknowledge and reaffirm the relationship necessary for appeal. ‘My God’ suggests a past relationship that is the proper ground and context for this urgent appeal.

Look on me and answer me or else my enemy will say they overcome me and rejoice when I fall. The writer of the psalm makes his problem God’s problem. If he is ridiculed God will be ridiculed and diminished. God is now being told what God needs to know. And that of course is the premise on which all serious prayer operates. In this brutal and frank exchange the psalmist is laying out the facts as they see it. Out of this situation God can make a new act.

Then the psalmist waits. Who knows how long the pause is between verse 4 and verse 5. *‘But I trust in your unfailing love.’*

It is a wait in darkness, a wait in disorientation. There must be a wait. Perhaps a long wait, because there is no other court of appeal. To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. You are the Resurrection and the Life. One must simply wait until there is a response.

Then we don’t know how long the wait but when the psalmist speaks again he is on the way to a new orientation. Verses 5-6 express some movement out of the rage earlier. They are statements of trust plus a motivational clause. *I have trusted… my heart rejoices…., I will sing…. because the Lord has been good to me.*

There is dramatic movement in this psalm. From rage to a reaffirmation of trust. The rage and the waiting are not acts of doubt or distrust. Quite the reverse. You have to believe God is there in order to be angry at Him.

Expressing anger in any relationship is always risky. That is why some people repress their anger because they don’t want to upset the other person, nor do they want to jeopardize their relationship with that person. If you get angry with someone and they can take the hump they could become estranged from you.

When I am preparing couples for marriage I have a section on expressing our anger to our partner. We try and agree rules for how to fight and the importance of fighting a good fight. I am always more concerned at the couples who say they never fight, they never have disagreements, all is wonderful in the garden. When I did training with Relate they called these couples the Babes in the Wood – the ones who think their relationship is always going to be sweetness and light. When real hurt and anger comes along there is a real threat to their delusions and consequently their relationship.

This psalm arguably therefore shows great faith in God and the psalmist’s relationship with God. The psalmist is so secure in His faith and his relationship with God that this honest address can be given. Either that or there is nothing to lose. The pretensions are off. The gloves are off. But from the plea comes a movement to praise.

Recently the Prime Minster suggested that the government would invest more in provision of talking therapies for those with mental illness. So much of the health budget goes into curing physical health whilst emotional, mental health is underfunded. What we know from talk therapies is that we do not move beyond the repressed memory or feelings unless we speak it out loud to one with the authority to hear it. In our culture we have understood that in terms of one to one therapy. In church context – confession.

Grievance addressed to an authorized partner does free us. You get things off your chest. A new way forward often opens up as a result. It is as though putting your pain into words brings an answer and healing.

In this Psalm by expressing the rage the mood changes to confidence. Unseen, God has done something, touched a core of old confidence and quietened distress.

The ‘*How Long’s’* may still be there. The singer of this psalm may still be facing the long haul. When will this end? But he dares to trust once again. He dares to have confidence that once more he will know God’s salvation and deliverance. The psalmist even anticipates the moment when he can sing and dance.

May God grant us the trust to be angry with Him and the trust to trust again.