

Psalms V. Sentiments of Trust

Contemplation of the wonder of God's presence and action in creation and in the history of Israel encourages confidence and trust in God. Encouraged by Jesus, in the midst of our troubles we place our trust in God: 'Do not be afraid. I am with you'(John 6:20); 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me'(John 14:1).

Psalm 23 reflects on the Exodus journey to the Promised Land and pictures God as a shepherd. In the first part of the psalm, God, like a shepherd, is looking after us as we journey, guiding us to pasture, and to the oasis where we can slake our thirst and find rest. When the time comes to move on, we know that God is with us. When darkness falls and we cannot see, we listen for the familiar sound of the shepherd's staff as it strikes the firm earth and the rocks, and when we are straying we feel the familiar touch of the rod, directing us along the right path. With such care we are confident that we will not stray or lag behind. Led and protected by the Shepherd, we trust that we will want for nothing. We are on the right path and with a God who is faithful.

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

In the second part of the psalm we experience ourselves as fugitives, banished from the community, but welcomed by God into the protection and hospitality of God's home where we enjoy the refreshment and intimacy of a banquet. However, we must move on. We are pursued by enemies, but God gives us his own Goodness and Covenant Love as escorts. They will go with us, and so God will be present with us on the journey to the sanctuary which awaits us.

'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.'

In Psalm 27 the Psalmist is battling with fear. His longing is to be near God: 'Your face, Lord, do I seek'(Psalm 27:8), and as he focuses on the intimacy of God's presence in his life he grows in confidence and overcomes his fear.

'For He will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
He will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
He will set me high on a rock'(Psalm 27:5).
'Hope in the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage.
Hope in the Lord!'(Psalm 27:14).

In Psalm 42-43 we witness the tension of one who feels the absence of God but continues to trust in his presence. The psalmist knows what it is to experience God's presence. However, he is living in exile from Jerusalem and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness. He experiences God as absent, and likens himself to a timid, alert female deer which has the scent of the life-giving water and is longing for it. He keeps repeating the refrain:

'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God'(42:5,11; 43:5).

In Psalm 131, the psalmist calms his anxieties as a mother calms the anxieties of her little child.

'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.'

We recall the following words from the Hebrew Scriptures:

'It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms ... I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them'(Hosea 11:3-4).

'It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God'(Ps. 22:9-10).

'You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth'(Psalm 71:5).

'You shall be suckled and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.'

(Isaiah 66:12-13).

We recall also Jesus' words:

'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'(Matthew 18:3-4).

'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will'(Luke 10:21).

The following psalms, too, focus in a special way on trust. Psalm 77 recalls the Exodus in order to resist the temptation to lose trust. Psalm 78 recalls the history of God's saving love in the life of Israel and so exhorts the people not to lose trust in spite of sin. Psalm 91 is a liturgical encouragement to trust in God. Psalm 115 is a critique of idol worship. We are to trust God alone. Psalm 121 is a liturgical expression and reinforcement of trust.

We find this sentiment of trust in many of the psalms:

'I will lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.'

(Psalm 4:8)

'The Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.'

(Psalm 11:7)

'I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure'(Psalm 16:8-9).

'This God – his way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him'(Psalm 18:30).

'Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name'(Psalm 33:20-21).

'I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever'(Psalm 52:8).

'O my strength, I will watch for you; for you, O God, are my fortress. my God of steadfast love'(Psalm 59:9-10).

'For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken ... For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honour; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us'(Psalm 62:1-2,5-8).

'This I know, that God is for me.

In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?'(Psalm 56:9-10).

'O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you'(Psalm 84:12).

The Psalmist is confident that God hears his cry for help:

'Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.
The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer'(Psalm 6:8-9).

'You do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands;
the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan ...
O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
so that those from earth may strike terror no more'(Psalm 10:14,17-18).

He places his trust in God, not on the strength of his army:

'Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God'(Psalm 20:7).

However bad things are, the Psalmist is confident in God's love and care:

'Many are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God."
But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head'.
(Psalm 3:2-3)

'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.'
(Psalm 46:1-3)

'He will send from heaven and save me, he will put to shame those who trample on me.
God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness'(Psalm 57:3).

'I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel.
You carry me to a glorious destiny'(Psalm 73:23-24 - spoken after a long interior struggle).

'Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps'(Psalm 85:9-13).

'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities'(Psalm 130:5-8).