

The Prayer of Protest

Psalm 73 is a psalm for our times. Many of the psalms, the prayer book and spiritual resource of the Jewish people, are prayers of protest, articulating human experience and challenging God about it. One of the most remarkable is Psalm 73. It begins with a fairly straightforward statement of faith, but then immediately points out the gulf between this pious orthodoxy and the psalmist's experience. God doesn't seem to give us what we think we deserve. He doesn't seem to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. In fact the wicked seem to do very well, and get away with it. Right now, while we are all vulnerable in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, scammers and fraudsters are taking advantage of our distraction to weaken and defraud us, and many will never be caught. What is the point in being pure in heart and trying to be upright, asks the psalmist, when we are surrounded by wicked people and a world in meltdown? So the psalmist confronts the questions we all ask from time to time about the human condition, and especially today as we face a devastating global pandemic. What have we done to deserve this, and where is God in the midst of our trouble and despair? The psalmist wrestles with his doubts "in the sanctuary of God" (v 17), where he begins to see things in a wider perspective. For him prayer is not an effortless recitation of limp platitudes but an active and costly struggle to find meaning in a morally conflicted world.

He reaches the conclusion that becoming embittered (v21) could actually cut him off from God, and that despite his restless questioning God is still close to him (v23-24) and will not let him go. God remains with him, loves him, and sustains him throughout his times of trial, and honours the fragile trust of those who feel weak and powerless. There is here a striking collision within this one psalm between a sense of doubt and a sense of God's presence, which eventually leads to the final note of affirmation and praise. "My chief good is to be with thee, O God; I have chosen thee, Lord God, to be my refuge." This is a psalm that all of us can pray during these anxious and troubling days, not minimising our doubts and questions, but affirming our belief that God is with us, a very present help in times of trouble.

The Venerable David Meara April 2020