

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2009 Christ Church 6.30 pm

Songs of Life - Suffering – Psalm 13, Ruth 1: 1-21, 2 Corinthians 1: 3-11

Let us pray

God our father we thank you for your word. We ask that you will be at work in each one of us now, teaching us, rebuking us where necessary, and also loving us with your precious and holy love. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tonight we're continuing our look at the songs of life in our sermon series and its the turn of psalm 13 in which David is clearly suffering. Its on page 548 of our bibles and it might be a good idea to keep hold of that page for next few minutes. So David is suffering and in fact, so bad a time is he having, he feels that even God has turned away from him. David cries out in verse 1 "How long will you hide your face from me?" Now I know that most people go through times in their life when they suffer for one reason or another and I hope that tonight isn't going to be one of those times! Indeed when I was typing this sermon last Saturday, my legs were still suffering from all the dancing we enjoyed at our barn dance and harvest supper.

I don't know about you but my life has been characterised by some fairly traumatic events. Events which have quite literally taken me to the edge of despair, pain, and uncertainty. At the moment I'm probably somewhere in between verse 4 and verse 5 of our Psalm. There are many times when my heart rejoices. When reading and studying the bible is a delight. When I really feel like one of God's children. But there are also times when I fall and I see my enemies have overcome me.

In the past I have been right there with David in verses 1 and 2. Throughout my divorce, through the death of my father last year, the work uncertainties of this year, I have been echoing David's lament – "How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" Now I'm not saying that if you are suffering at the moment or at some stage in the future reading Psalm 13 is an instant cure to the suffering we experience in the fallen world we live in, but the Psalms do give us words to use when we *are* suffering. I can remember being told to read Psalm 121 in the last week of my father's life, don't read it now, but please do read it sometime and you will see why it is one of my favourites.

In psalm 13 we see David crying out to God in a way that perhaps feels uncomfortable to us, maybe even selfish? Certainly he is inward gazing. Putting those first two verses in my own words, I would say:

Why is my life in a mess?

Where are you God?

You care enough to save me from my sin and an everlasting death through Jesus, but don't you care about me now?

Just look at the depths of David's despair right there in verse 2 – "Every day I have sorrow in my heart." This is not just having a bad day, and whilst we don't exactly know what had caused David's problem, we do know his heart is aching, his despair is so great, his heart aches – this is a real and long lasting life problem. This is a cry of - I need help God and I need it now!

So despite it feeling uncomfortable to read such a rant at God, David does show us that it is OK to share with God our deepest sorrows, even if we are angry or

frustrated with God himself. The message here is when life's journey gets really tough, God needs to know about it. And our first reading follows our theme of God's people suffering, which Carol will read for us now, Ruth 1: 1-22. Thank you Carol. We're going to sing together and continue the theme of David's lament – David's cry out to God "How long O Lord" and we're also echoing the suffering we heard about in our first reading from Ruth.

We've just been singing "How long before the weeping turns to songs of joy?" and turning to look at our first reading, on page 267, we heard that Naomi has lost her husband and both her sons, reason enough to be suffering deep despair. The death of a son or daughter is supposed to be one of the worst human experiences to live with and here we see Naomi looking at the famine, the consequent migration to Moab, she is now a widow, and her sons have also died, so no wonder she sees all these as a sign of God punishing her. We read on that such is her despair she changes her name to Mora rather than Naomi, which if you look down at the notes at the bottom of the page, her name now means bitter. And look who she blames in verses 20 and 21. God has made her life very bitter. Naomi sees God as being the cause of all her problems and her empty life.

Well before my sermons sends you into some kind of deep depression, talking about all this suffering and misery – there must be a reason why God wants us to see the depths of despair that these people are experiencing. I think that God wants us to see that we need to be honest with him. Its almost as if God knows we need someone to feel our pain and if you've ever tried it, humans make a pretty poor substitute for God, as does drinking or drugs, which often make things worse and only give temporary relief from the burden, they don't actually fix anything. Only love can fix the type of suffering we read about here. God clearly does not want us to be sitting in a corner sulking, he does not want us to turn away from him, in fact, and I only realised this when writing this sermon – these few verses provide a great insight into just how much we are loved by God. His love extends to us even when we blame him for our suffering. And despite all of that, he still wants to help us. That is divine love indeed.

But we must first recognise we need to ask God for help, just as David moves onto in verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 13. We need to ask God to help us in every situation we find ourselves in. So turning back to psalm 13, see how David has changed, he uses the word "Look" – see, God is no longer the hidden face. He then continues with "on me" – David wants God to help him – he wants to have that personal relationship. "Give light" – renew my spirit. David, just like us, needs to be renewed by God. "My foes" – David now sees that God is no longer the problem.

David has been rock bottom and is now asking God for help and if you've been coming to our series of "getting started in prayer" on Wednesday evenings, you will know that in the majority of our prayers we are asking God for help. Certainly we can use prayer to give thanks, to praise God and to let his word dwell within us, but the majority of our prayers are requests for God to do stuff.

When I was in deep despair last year, when I was simply existing and waiting for Dad to pass away, Psalm 121 helped me, just as Psalm 13 can help anyone who is suffering. When you're down you cannot always see your way out – believe me I know all about that, but David's words in verse 3 and 4 can be used as a prayer asking God for help. And if like me you need to ask God for help, we will use these words as a prayer later tonight.

The last verses of the Psalm see David at the exact opposite end of the scale to despair – he knows that God loves him and whilst there have been times that he thought God was not there, he now realises that God was with him all the time. And this is real encouragement for us to persevere and help one another – to pray for one another – to stay behind after the service and have someone pray with you. Only when we do this, will we be able to use the words of these last two verses and see that God has been with us the whole time. Let us look just how God continues to do that in our second reading, which Mike will read for us now. 2 Corinthians 1: 3-11. Thank you Mike. We're going to sing again this time joining with David in asking God for help and waiting for help to come "I lift my eyes up". Just as David recognised he needed to rely on God and ask for help, we're going to sing now that God is our only hope.

Just as we heard earlier about David and Naomi's suffering, let us now look at Paul and specifically at verses 8 and 9. We were under great pressure – far beyond our ability to endure. Despaired even of life! In other words – they'd rather be dead! That is Paul really hurting! Look in again in verse 9 – in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. Now unless you want me to be still speaking at midnight, there isn't the time to dwell on what has happened to Paul in Asia, but looking back Paul now sees this time as a lesson from God. A lesson in whom to trust. He now sees that God has been with him all the time. Look at verse 5. Paul says that just as the sufferings of Christ flow into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we want to be *in Jesus*, to have *comfort overflowing*, we must also feel some of the suffering of Jesus. And at the end of verse 9 Paul explains what their suffering has been all about – this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God.

God has given us Jesus for our salvation. Primarily to have our sins forgiven and yes, to bring us through faith into everlasting life. But God has not finished with us. If you've become a Christian, God has forgiven your sins through Jesus. God has made it possible that we don't have to die an eternal death, but he still wants us to rely on him every day of our lives.

Reliance on God must be one of the hardest things to teach and I suppose therefore must be one of the hardest lessons to learn. Its probably why being a Christian is so hard for many people. Look at the hardship Paul goes through to learn to rely on God. Look at David and what he had to go through to see God had been with him all the time. And when I look at my own life, I see that my lesson in relying on God has been hard, learned from many months and years of suffering. I also know that God answers that cry for help in many different ways. Having a member of our prayer ministry team pray with me, and for me, at the end of the service is answered prayer from God. Someone telling me to read psalm 121 is answered prayer from God. God's help is not always dramatic and life changing. Very often it is that still small voice of calm. Why? Because unlike us, God seems to know exactly what we need, and does a far better job of delivering than we do!

I know I would rather look back on my life and see that God had been there all the time, than end up with a life with no praise, no rejoicing, and no singing to the Lord. So what about you? Maybe you've already learned to rely on God every day. Maybe like David, Paul and Naomi you need to suffer, to learn that lesson to rely on God. Or maybe you are suffering right now and you need to ask God for help. Maybe God has already answered your prayer for help and you are bursting with praise and thanksgiving! Once you realise you need to rely on God, verses 3 and 4 of our Psalm can become our daily prayer and only then can we look back at the end of each day and I say - I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me.

Before we sing again and before our time of prayer, let us say psalm 13 together.

How long, O LORD ? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,  
for he has been good to me. Amen.