

Reflection on Psalm 31

David Fotheringham,

March 2020

Loving God,

You are close to all of us, wherever we are.

We give you praise for your steadfast love,
and for your compassion, courage and hope
as we see it in Jesus Christ, who leads us all into life.

Be with us in this remote form of gathering,
and with those in all places who are struggling, sick, or sorrowful.

Bring your peace and hope,
and grant us wisdom and grace, patience and hope,
and the opportunities for thankfulness and care.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Psalm 31 is attributed to David.

The Psalms as a whole are like a prayer-book or a song-book for the Temple.

This particular Psalm is an individual lament, which, as I said is attributed to David but becomes a prayer on which we can reflect and in which we can join.

In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

**²Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.**

**Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.**

**³You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,**

**⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.**

**⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.**

In this first stanza we have begun with prayer.

This comes from a culture in which shame is a significant driver, hence the opening "In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; never let me be put to shame."

But more generally, the Psalmist throws themselves – throws us – into the merciful hands of God – literally saying "Into your hand I commit my Spirit". Those are words that you might remember Jesus quoting, on the cross.

Say them for yourself:

Into your hand I commit my spirit...

you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God....

Let's take verses 6-8.

I'll read verse 6; you read 7; and I'll read 8.

⁶You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.

⁷**I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,**

⁸and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Here we have an expression of trust. Even though the speaker's affliction is real, and is seen, it is seen most importantly by God who is steadfast in love. The Psalm affirms that God does not deliver me into the hand of the enemy, though the name or nature of the enemy is unspecified. I don't think that it helps to call a virus an "enemy", because I personally don't think that militaristic language helps, though the Bible does employ that kind of language at times - like in the letter to the Ephesians when we are urged to put on the armour of God. You might recall that in that passage we are called to put on

the belt of truth,
the breastplate of righteousness,
shoes of readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace,
the sword of the Spirit,
the shield of faith and
the helmet of salvation.

We might put on the shield of good hygiene at the moment! And shoes of readiness to proclaim the gospel with whatever care, assistance, *or restraint* we can offer our neighbours in need.

I saw a lovely reflection that suggested that

"Every hand that we don't shake
must become a phone call that we place."

"Every embrace that we avoid
must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern."

"Every inch and every foot that we physically place
between ourselves and another,
must become a thought
as to how we might be of help to that other,
should the need arise."

(That was from Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, in Los Angeles)

The rest of the 'armour' in Ephesians is about holding fast to the assurance of the steadfast love of God, which we see in that part of the Psalm.

⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰ **For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.**

¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² **I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.**

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

Here in the centre of this Psalm are these words of lament. It sounds a lot like an experience of disease, and also of what we know call "social distancing" - but with an added layer of the sense that people are plotting against the Psalmist.

For us, where we are is not because of some conspiracy. But for many this is unsettling, and for some there is serious ill-health. So while the Psalmist is writing from a world away as a community here and now we can appreciate the lament. Lamenting is deeply acknowledged here. And if you were reading this in your own time you could spend further reflective time here.

But then the Psalmist draws us on, in verses 14-18.

¹⁴ **But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."**

¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶ **Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.**

¹⁷ Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD,

for I call on you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.

**18 Let the lying lips be stilled
that speak insolently against the righteous
with pride and contempt.**

At the moment we are getting closer to Easter. Our readings through Lent are taking Jesus through increasing conflict. But I can imagine words like these (or most of them) on Jesus' lips. Trusting God.

Jesus has walked through the 40 days in the desert; has taught and healed and made friends; and in the midst of storms and hardship reassures us with his own trust in God. For the church ever since, living by the Holy Spirit in the time between Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming reconciliation and renewal of all things, the same trust is there, enabling Paul to write about how the whole creation groans, BUT STILL there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God,
not even hardship, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.

Jesus embodies the Psalmist's hope for us. So, like the Psalmist, we can turn to thanks...

19 O how abundant is your goodness
that you have laid up for those who fear you,
and accomplished for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of everyone!

**20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from human plots;
you hold them safe under your shelter
from contentious tongues.**

21 Blessed be the LORD,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was beset as a city under siege.

**22 I had said in my alarm,
"I am driven far from your sight."
But you heard my supplications
when I cried out to you for help.**

Perhaps we are like a city under siege.
But the Lord holds us through all things and hears our cry. So the last two verses make our conclusion:

23 Love the LORD, all you his saints.
The LORD preserves the faithful,
but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.

²⁴ **Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the LORD.**