

We're going to read Psalm 22 which has those words in – in fact it starts with those words that I mentioned earlier on in the service. We're going to read the words together...or I'm going to read them to you rather.

So there's the heading; it's to the tune of "The Doe of the Morning" which I don't know so we're not going to sing it. But it is a Psalm of David, and David wrote:

[Reading Psalm 22:1-31]

Amen. So, let's just spend a few moments looking at this scripture this psalm.

So the trouble this psalmist, this person feels – they face. The psalmist feels: a longing for God, in these first couple of verses. The psalmist feels that God in his hour of need is so utterly distant. This causes a massive tension between the psalmist's belief and his lived experience – he believes that God will always be there, but his experience tells him that he has been deserted. His problem is more than the mystery of his own suffering, his problem actually is the contradiction between what is being taught, what he has believed and what he finds and experiences and knows from his life now. He discovers he's loathed by other people: "All that see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."¹

If God seems absent to this psalmist, the people around him seem all too present. Their comment and their body language undermine any remaining sense of self worth the psalmist has; so in verse 6 he describes himself as the most insignificant of animals – a worm. As these enemies pour out their contempt on his faith this compounds his problem with God – Lord, where are you in my time of desperation?

And as so many of us do he laments, he cries out to God, and he talks about these dogs – a pack of villains who are encircling him – and he says they pierce his hands and his feet; and of course we often take those words to be a prophecy about what happened to Jesus on the cross. But here the psalmist is describing what an attack by these enemies feels like, and he does it using animal references: so he talks about the bulls, the big bulls of Bashan – I'm guessing they were famous massive great big bulls – and those are the bulls that he sees figuratively coming at him. He talks of lions tearing his flesh, dogs closing in for the kill, and, as so many of us do in these situations, he falls into self-pity: describes himself as like spilt water (in verse 14), a bag of bones limp as melted wax. He feels that everything about him, all of his fortitude and strength is just melting away. In verse 16 he describes himself as like a baked clay pot. All of these pictures that he's using: he's seeing himself as not a human being but as a thing that is being destroyed by these people around him.

But even in the depths of his troubles he still shows trust: he recognises God's position. In verse 3 he says "You are enthroned as the Holy One." In verses 4 and 5 he talks about God's power, and talks about the fact that in the past your people, they trusted you and you delivered them Lord. He talks about God's purpose: Lord you brought me out of the womb; and he's almost saying "Lord why did you bring me out of the womb if it was to allow me to be destroyed in this time? It can't be that – there must be more! I'm no accident of nature. You brought me about for a reason."

1 Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version.

He refers to God's providence: "From my mother's womb you have been my God."

And he refers to God's promise: in verses 19 and 21 he states what he knows, what he longs to be true – and isn't that sometimes what prayer is: "Lord you know the situation I'm in, hear my prayer as I want you to please change this situation" and we're praying with our imaginations "Lord make this so if it's your will." So he says "Do not be far from me" even though it feels God is far from him, "Do not be far from me. Come quickly to help! Deliver me, rescue me, save me." And it's interesting the pivot point for this psalm is – that's why I left a little pause when I was reading it [the pivot point is] – verse 22: the end of verse 21 and the beginning of verse 22 there is a change.

The change possibly was in the psalmist's circumstances, or it was in the psalmist's mindset, but something changed. For the rest of this psalm he is no longer consumed by his problems but focuses on God's sovereignty and God's power: God's honour. Did something materially change in his circumstances? Well certainly the very last words of the psalm say he, that is God, has done it. So perhaps there was something that happened that it changed his situation, or God changed his mindset, helped him not to focus on all of the problems but actually on the fact that beyond those problems God has not changed, God is still the same God who loves him and is steadfast in his love for the psalmist, and for us.

Now the psalmist knows that God was and is always there despite his feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. For anyone of us if we listen to our feelings and base our sense of faith on those feelings, they will let us down because feelings are like a cork on the sea – up and down all the while – you can't rely on them. But we can rely on the character, the nature, the promises of God.

So he talks about the vows that he keeps: "I would declare your name to my people, in the assembly I will praise you." He's saying: "I am going to go into the house of God and give praise to you; despite all those that scorn, all the enemies around me, I'm not going to allow them to define the nature of my faith – I'm going to the house of the Lord to say 'Lord you are still my God.'"

And he sees a vision. In verses 27-31 he has mentioned a banquet for the poor in verse 26 and this leads on into these amazing words where he's looking for a future where all the peoples, all the nations, both now and in future – future generations – will worship and submit willingly to God's kingship. He sees that vision in this psalm that has started so negatively.

And so we have a template here, but I would suggest you the template is not simply set by the psalmist, there's a template, a pattern, for us here that we can trace in the life of Jesus – in his life and his death. Jesus experienced the silence of God his father. Calvary, when he was crucified and died, was much more than physical torture, was much more than public humiliation and painful death (although it was all of those things); it was the spiritual torment of being separated from the Father whom Jesus had lived in intimacy with his whole life. But even in the sense of being abandoned by God Jesus never let go of his Father, never gave in to his feelings; even in the very words, the cry of dereliction (as we call it) – those words that I read earlier on in the service. This is clear that Jesus has not let go of the Father when he cried out: "My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me?" He's saying "You are still my God even in this moment when I feel as though you've left me; you are still my God."

So Jesus experienced the silence of God. But Jesus represents for us the deliverance of God. Of course, the spiritual outcomes and the significance of these words for the psalmist and for Jesus were very different: the psalmist who wrote psalm 22, David so we're told, he was delivered from

death, ie death was postponed. David still died – in fact I think you can probably find David's tomb in Israel². David still died but for Jesus death was not: he wasn't delivered from death, he defeated death, ie death, in its power to destroy relationship with God, has been annihilated. Physical death can no longer separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Our lives may still sometimes lead us into paths of uncertainty – in fact I'm willing to say it's the one certain thing in life. Sometimes God's presence may seem hidden, or even absent. However his death and resurrection give us God's full and final answer; if we are willing to trust God's promises, trust his character rather than our feelings, we shall not be disappointed despite our apparent circumstances.

Praise God.

² Transcriber's note: David's Tomb in Jerusalem is under the “Upper Room” (which is likely not the actual upper room of the Last Supper)