

PSALM 125

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.
- ² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds God's people,
from this time on and for evermore.
- ³ For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous may not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.
- ⁴ Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.
- ⁵ But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers.
- Peace be upon Israel!

This psalm begins with a powerful affirmation of faith: "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides for ever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds God's people." Zion, of course, is the spiritual name for Jerusalem and the holy temple at the very centre of it. Height and altitude gives it a special appeal as closer to God somehow. Have you ever felt closer to God being on a mountain and "surrounded" by a feeling of the sacred? Or have you ever felt solidly grounded internally, and certain nothing could shake you? These are beautiful states of being while they last. But as we know there are valleys below the mountains and we must all pass through them at some point. And there are times when we are shaken inside and out as life happens. Vulnerability is built into the human condition.

But this psalm is not pointing to the solidity of faith and the certainty of hope in God surrounding us simply in some literal way. It is trying to inspire such faith and hope in a prayerful and worshipful way. For the threat of spiritual dislocation is just outside the sanctuary and as pilgrims leave the mountain. And what form does this spiritual dislocation take? "For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous may not stretch out their hands to do wrong." A sceptre is something a ruler holds, and it is a symbol of power and leadership. But what if the leadership of the nation is corrupt and abusive, evil and destructive? How will that affect people in the land? Will people become influenced by such wickedness in how they behave because this kind of behaviour is rewarded in leadership?

In nations that are democracies, a government often reflects something of the majority of voters. And sometimes, a minority of us can feel at odds with the popular mood. In nations ruled by autocratic or dictatorial leaders or regimes, however, it can be even more fearful to oppose the “wickedness” of those who rule. Think about Russia or Iran or Afghanistan these days, or Hong Kong among other places. This would also have been the case at times for the Hebrew people then, as much as it is the case still today. Peace is anything but a given in Israel, and opposition to the “wickedness” of those in power in the name of goodness even if such goodness is support of the claim of Palestinians for a state of their own, has a cost that can be dear for those on the ground.

And so, the prayer of the psalmist and the people collectively who pray/sing this psalm in worship is this: “Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts.” And for those who do evil because of the benefits it might gain in evil times under evil regimes, the prayer is this: “But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways the Lord will lead with evildoers,” wherever such leading may take them. Whether goodness is rewarded and evil punished in a way we can see it openly or not, the psalmist believes this is the way things in the world should be. The psalmist also hopes God can make it happen. Evil should not win, even for a time. But God does not control the universe in some forceful way like some tyrant or bully would. The psalmist must come to this realization like all of us. And yet, perhaps, God can work through the hearts of the faithful empowering hope, building up faith and making love strong “from this time on and for evermore.”

Do you feel part of some larger goodness even as life and the world around you can feel depressing and dispiriting? Whenever I feel discouraged (and given the state of our world and our politics these days that is often), leaning on a faith that I belong to a divine kingdom of goodness and love, often evinced by networks of the faithful and the community of AHPC I am a part of, helps me gain my ground again so that I keep the resistance to wickedness alive in me in whatever small ways that’s possible and through whatever small acts of kindness, compassion and justice are available to me. What about you? What keeps goodness alive for you and what grounds your faith these days?

PRAYER: Keep us grounded, O God, and grant us a vivid sense of your sacred presence this coming week. May we see some justice reflected in those who lead us, despite the evidence of injustice by many leaders around the world and closer to home too. May corruption be found out and may goodness be rewarded. And may we ourselves feel renewed encouragement to act with kindness, advocate for justice, and offer up compassionate presence to someone near us or further away. May we also feel a renewed connection to a larger goodness through community visible and invisible. May we trust in a greater communion of those who prize justice in a world where we can often feel isolated and alone and where injustice seems so often the victor. Amen.