

Sermon preached in Saint Andrew's, St Andrews, 3rd December 2017

Isaiah 64.1-9

Once again this week I find myself wondering why the compilers of the Lectionary have chosen to draw their lines as they have. Isaiah chapter 64 has three more verses in it which could easily have been included, and which help us to appreciate the context, and the note of urgent frustration shot through the prophet's lament. Let me read them for you. (I'll include verse nine again, just for the sake of continuity.)

'Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. (And it continues...)
Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?'

It's the cry of pain; the cry of someone at the end of their tether. And it comes at a very low ebb in the life of the nation. Israel has been invaded by the Babylonians, the royal court and a large part of the populace has been carried off into exile, and the city of Jerusalem has had its walls broken down and its temple desecrated. Those in exile, and those remaining in the occupied homeland, have begun inter-marrying with their Babylonian conquerors, and no doubt too to worship the gods of their heathen spouses. In all these and many other ways the identity of Israel as the people of God's choosing and promising and calling is seriously at risk. And the prophet is tearing his hair out, because in the midst of it all God is doing precisely nothing. Or at least that's how it seems.

‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... that the mountains would quake at your presence, ... that the nations might tremble at your presence!’ What are you playing at God??!! Why are you keeping silent?? How can you restrain yourself in the face of such horrors, when your people are at risk of dissolution, and all that we hold sacred is being profaned and your name spat upon and trampled in the dirt? How about some of that fire and smoke and thunder, or a parting of the sea like the old days: can you still do that? We could use some of that right now! Why are you hiding yourself when you could be flexing a bit of divine muscle? *Where are you God??!!*

If the questions and the sentiments have a contemporary ring about them I suspect it’s because, from time to time, most of us find ourselves in a place where we ask them. A place where God seems absent, remote, hidden from us, when we’d like nothing more than a moment of epiphany, or a sense of his closeness to us. Or times when something terrible happens, to ourselves, to those we love, or in the world at large – beamed into our consciousness and sphere of concern by television and the internet. And, amidst the shock and the sense of it being so dreadfully wrong that such things should happen at all, a voice somewhere in our head is longing to cry out ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...!!’ Or words to that effect. Where are you God? What are you playing at?

I want very briefly to pick up three things which I think this lament from Isaiah has to say to us if and when we find ourselves in one or other of those situations (as, at some point, if our faith is alive and kicking, we almost certainly will).

First, don’t suppress that response. Don’t refuse to allow it to come to the surface or find expression – whatever form that expression might take. It’s not blasphemous, or sacrilegious; it’s not evidence of

a lack of faith. In fact, it's a perfectly natural thing to feel, and if anything, it's evidence of a faith that is alive and well. And Scripture, in the prophets, the psalms and elsewhere, is full of it. People in a difficult and painful and desolate place, venting their frustration, their anger, their rage, their questions and doubts – because God seems remote, uninvolved, hidden. If it makes you feel better, then you can always appropriate a passage such as this one, and read it aloud, filling it with your own strength of feeling at the time. Or you can just vent your feelings in your own words and your own way. But don't suppress them. It's part of a living relationship with a God who is personal, and wants and expects us to be honest with him. And knows when we aren't.

Second, when it comes to those experiences where our spiritual life, our relationship with God, seems particularly difficult or dry, where God seems far away rather than close, and our praying or devotions seem to fall on deaf ears – very often it's because something's wrong in our behavior, something that we're well aware of, but somehow manage to keep in a separate compartment of our lives from God (or so we think), which amounts to disobedience, deliberately doing what we know God would have us not do. This isn't always the cause – Scripture itself and plentiful witness from Christians across the centuries suggest that God sometimes sends those same experiences of dryness, of a 'dark night of the soul' to the most mature and holiest of believers, as a way of testing and strengthening their faith. But sometimes, as in this passage from Isaiah, it's clear that there is a link between sin and the experience of being unable to 'find' God in our lives anymore, the sense that if he's there at all, then he's hiding himself, and our spiritual radar can no longer detect him.

Actually, in this passage, in verse 5, Isaiah suggests that it was *because* God hid himself that the people sinned, which at first glance looks like a cheeky attempt to shift the blame by reversing the order of things. But, of course, the reality is that *when* God feels remote (whatever the cause of that), it *does* become much easier to live life

disobediently, if that is what we are inclined to do. And then we're into a downward spiral where sin and the seeming absence of God are tangled up together in a hopeless mess from which only God, sooner or later, can extricate us. But disobedience damages relationships, even on the human level. And a sense of being cut-off from God can and sometimes does follow as a consequence of sin. So, says C S Lewis, if God seems unreal, the first thing to do is to try living your life in the ways that he calls us to live, and turn your back on anything that your better self knows, deep down, God would be unhappy with. You won't succeed all the time, of course, but you may find that the attempt itself opens up the channels through which God's reality courses into your heart and mind and will.

So, if you've reached a point where God seems far off, absent, remote – and presuming that that is something you wish were otherwise – first, don't let the feeling fester: tell God, in no uncertain terms if necessary, that you are feeling that way. And second, give yourself a spiritual health check – an MOT, asking yourself about the health of your living in various different quarters of your life. And you may find something lurking in a dark corner which needs dealing with; and you can name it, and confess it, and repent of it (turn your back on it) and receive God's forgiveness for it. And that may prove to be the thing that brings the reality of God flooding back into your life.

Thirdly, and lastly, and importantly: if the sense of God's absence or remoteness is one provoked by some overwhelming event in our lives or the lives of others, which seems on the face of it to call into question either the reality or else the goodness of God, because, well, surely, he would step in and do something about it if he could? ... then again this is a passage which speaks to us. Because this is precisely what is swirling around in the prophet's head. What's God doing? Why doesn't he tear open the heavens and come down and

do something about it all? Why, in the midst of all this misery and pain and suffering, does he leave us practically godforsaken?

But what the passage reminds us, in concert with the wider witness of Scripture, is that these experiences are a normal part of life in God's world, for the time being. Isaiah refers to the 'awesome deeds' which God did in Israel's far off past, and wants to know why God doesn't put on a repeat performance now that things have reached such a dreadful state. But the very fact that, like so many others in the Bible, he is compelled to ask the question at all, reminds us that 'awesome deeds' like the Exodus or the Resurrection are NOT the way God chooses mostly to work in the world or in our lives, no matter how much we would like him to. He doesn't step in to right every injustice, punish every wrong, salve every hurt, or heal every sickness. He is not *absent*; he is always closer to us even than we are to ourselves, holding us and sustaining us in being, and working in and through the ordinariness and even the darkness of life to draw us closer to himself and to conform us ever more fully to the contours of his coming kingdom. And his chosen way of working with our pain and suffering is not, for the most part, to step in and alleviate it; but rather to share it and bear it with us, to hold us through it and, as a father or mother suffers the suffering of a child in pain, to suffer his own peculiar pain as he does so. And, when he finally does 'rend open the heavens and come down', in Isaiah's words, it is not in power and majesty, but in humility and weakness, making our human suffering his own, even unto death.

So that, oddly, precisely when it seems that God is far off, or uninvolved, when we feel 'godforsaken', precisely then we are closer to God than we ever are, and he closer to us; united with him in the very weakness and suffering and powerlessness which he has determined will be his general *modus operandi* in the world.

Of course, that's not the whole story. As we embark on the season of Advent, we look forward, too; forward in hope, looking for the

fulfilment of God's promise to bring the world and human history and us with it to a moment of judgment, mercy and new creation in which this history of suffering and loss will be taken up and made good, and we will live in the fullness of God's presence and the full awareness of his presence, sharing in his joy and enjoying his glory forever. For now, though, like Isaiah, we are in a time of waiting, of expectation rather than fulfilment; and sometimes, in the meanwhile, when suffering and evil seem to stalk the land unrivalled, it's only natural to crave a bit of divinely engineered shock and awe. Instead we get the sign of the cross (where God shows us what we should expect his way of dealing with evil, suffering and death to look like in this world), and the promise of the resurrection. Let's pray that through this season, we may learn to live in accordance with that sign, and in the light of that promise.

Amen