

PROLOGUE

Psalm 88: The Psalm of Darkness

O lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee:

² *Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry.*

³ *For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.*

⁴ *I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength:*

⁵ *Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou remember no more: and they are cut off from thy hand.*

⁶ *Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.*

⁷ *Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah.*

⁸ *Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth.*

⁹ *Mine eye mourned by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee.*

¹⁰ *Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah.*

¹¹ *Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction?*

¹² *Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?*

¹³ *But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.*

¹⁴ *LORD, why cast thou off my soul? why hide thou thy face from me?*

¹⁵ *I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted.*

¹⁶ *Thy fierce wrath goes over me; thy terrors have cut me off.*

¹⁷ *They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together.*

¹⁸ *Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.*

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 88 can indeed speak for many Trans people across the world – especially in those countries where they endure systematic persecution and the continual threat of death. Yet even here in the more tolerant United Kingdom we've all been in that position. I recall how this Psalm reflected my sense of despair during times of great affliction. It explores to a painful depth the frightful mystery of suffering which is the central theme of this service. Difficult though it maybe it is a mystery in need of attention given the times we are living through. Here, I can identify with Habakkuk who, when questioning the Lord about the horrors of his time, was told that the situation was about to get worse! He was about to endure living through an age of mass death that was to be graphically portrayed in the book of Lamentations

Unfortunately, my instinct borne out of prayer is that things are going to get worse and we all will face yet more horrific sights being conveyed by the media. The troubled times in which we live demand that we take extra care to ensure that our lives are built on the right foundation of a living relationship with Jesus Christ. As it warns in Psalm 11:3 *“If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?”* So the question needing to be faced is *‘who or what do we base our lives upon?’*

Without further ado let's begin this service and consider carefully the issues which have just been raised.

THE CONFESSION

First reading From Habakkuk 1:1-2:1

Opening Chorus: Great is the Darkness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NL0rYG6edw>

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us – a gathering of needy sinners. We sadly acknowledge that, in our fallen and utterly ruined condition, we have no inborn capacity or any desire to follow your will (Romans 3: 9b-20). Often, what we believe is right is delusion. Our own judgement can easily mislead us.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner (Jude 21b)

Lord [Father], have mercy (Psalm 30:10)

Christ, have mercy (Matthew 15:22)

Lord [Father], send your Holy Spirit to apply your mercy and cleanse our hearts from all proud selfishness, Amen (Jeremiah 17:9-10)

Abba Father, please forgive us (Galatians 4:6)

For the sake of your only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, please forgive us (John 3:16)

He died horribly upon the cross at Calvary to identify with our suffering and to open the way to God through the forgiveness of our sins (1 John 2:2 & 4:10)

Together let us pray:

**Lord God, in your power
I willingly put aside those sins
I have confessed.
Please forgive me
For committing them
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
Abba Father, show mercy
And send your Holy Spirit
To cleanse me
And to curb my many sins
From the darkness of my own heart and mind
Save me, oh Lord
Keep me from sin
So I may praise you**

Second reading From Job 3:1-13

Verdi's Requiem: Dies Irae (See back for the link)

THE GOSPEL WITNESS

Yet God, in your merciful love, you chose neither to destroy nor to distance yourself from your sin-stricken Creation. For you so loved the World that you sent your only begotten Son, that *"whosoever believes in Him [should] not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16)

For you did not send your Son into the world to condemn it; but that we who are in the World might be saved through Him (John 3:17)

"He that believes on him is not condemned; but he that believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18)

We do believe; thanks be to God (John 20:29)

"This is a faithful saying, worthy of [complete] acceptance" (1Timothy 1:15a)

***"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"* (1Timothy 1:15b)**

This saying sums-up the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which can, without exception [as long as true faith is present] redeem [great multitudes of] people from all nations and from all walks of life (Revelation 7:9)

Third Read from Matthew 27:39-46

Hymn: Fight The Good Fight

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YppcFC8mxKM>

A FRIGHTFUL MYSTERY

(Exploring the causes of sufferings and how (on God's Grace) we may respond to it.)

The Spiritual and Temporal Causes of Suffering

- 1) Satan, who is the ultimate cause of all suffering, aims to:**
 - 1.1 Alienate people from God**
 - 1.2 Inflict grief upon God**
 - 1.3 Take revenge for his banishment from Heaven**
 - 1.4 Force others to share in his eternal misery in Hell**
- 2) The following types of suffering exist: -**
 - 2.1 Satanic suffering**
 - 2.2 Background suffering**
 - 2.3 System suffering**
 - 2.4 Folly suffering**

2.5 Persecution suffering

2.6 Redemptive suffering

2.7 Reprobate suffering

3) These types of suffering may take place either separately or altogether, as seen at Christ's Passion

4) Redemptive suffering (known also as *'tribulation'*) is designed to bring unbelievers to Jesus and to increase the faithfulness and fruitfulness of God's own people.(The word *'tribulation'* stems from the Greek ***'Thulupsis'*** meaning *'pressure, affliction or trial;'* the suggestion is that tribulation is a test - something that the Lord allows It can affect both individuals and whole groups of churches). It has six levels of meaning: -

4.1 The narrow meaning, referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by Christians

4.2 The broad meaning, referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by Non-Christians, generally to bring them into God's Kingdom

4.3 The very broad meaning, referring to that redemptive suffering undergone by whole groups of churches in order to purify and make them effective witnesses to the Gospel

4.4 The Global meaning referring to that suffering which will be undergone by the entire world in order for evil to be subdued prior to Christ's return

4.5 The Cosmic meaning referring to that suffering which will be undergone by the old fallen, Creation to make way for a completely new one

5) Increased faithfulness and fruitfulness may occur during the tribulation itself or after it

Exposition of Mark 4:17

“And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a little time: afterward, when affliction or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.”

Responding to his disciples' request, (recorded Mark 4:12) Jesus is now engaged in interpreting the parable of the Sower to them. These words constitute part of that response. Evidently our Lord's intention was to encourage his followers to be so deeply grounded in their faith they could then go on to firmly withstand any future troubles.

The opening *“And have no root”* refers to the person who makes only a shallow profession of trust in Jesus. Their willingness to become a Christian may have been prompted by the desire to gain respectability, emotional relief or social acceptance within a church group. (The latter being especially the case with young people.) Whether they ever had a real saving relationship with God at the outset is debatable. Such superficial profession are a bane of modern Christianity, especially those initially showing great enthusiasm for Godly things. Sadly however, the novelty soon wears off the enthusiasm vanishes and other life events become more of a priority. This sequence of events definitely shows that any initial love for God or his people were indeed shallow and fleeting.

More specifically, the use of the word *‘root’* means to be *‘rooted in obedience’* and *‘fully committed’* to growing in the faith through such visible aids as Bible reading, the Sacraments, private prayer and fellowship in the local church. *‘In himself’* further underlines that such commitment to Jesus must be directly first-hand; for a second-hand faith relying upon the godliness of others is never sufficient. Hence, the chief characteristic of a person, *‘lacking root’* is that, although they may be willing to make a verbal profession of Christianity they are, in the long-term, unwilling to be totally committed to it.

'But endures for a little time' starkly illustrates the *'fair weather'* nature of those content to drift along with Christianity – as long as it affords obvious comfort. They want a religion of all joy and no discipline. These people may appear to be devout but their subsequent desertion shows the shallowness of their faith.

The next portion of the passage, *'for when affliction or persecution arises because of the word'* refers mainly to persecution suffering which is regarded as an unavoidable consequence of following Jesus. Note once again the use of the definite *'when'* rather than the more problematic *'if.'* The latter part of the sentence *'because of the word'* may refer not only to Jesus himself (because *'Word'* is one of his titles recorded in John 1:1) but could also include the active preaching of the Gospel from the *'word'* of God, the Holy Scriptures.

The next portion of this verse, *'immediately they are offended.'* delineates the true nature of the problem. The nominal believer really has embraced a totally incorrect impression of Christianity and has therefore entered the faith for the wrong reasons. This has inevitably led to unrealistic expectations, which become dashed, provoking a sense of anger and the desire to give up on this faith, which obviously *'doesn't work.'* Here the word *'offended'* conjures up the picture of someone being hurt, taking umbrage with the Almighty and then withdrawing from His presence in a bitter, furious sulk.

Many things may be deduced from the statement, *'immediately they are offended.'* However, only two will be further enlarged upon. Firstly, there's the inherent warning that followers of Jesus must be deeply embedded in their faith through regular obedience to His will. During any future upheavals, those

Christians most likely to give up on their faith will be those having always insisted on their own way rather than His. Secondly, it is the responsibility of local churches to faithfully witness to Jesus in their evangelism, to ensure a correct presentation of the whole Gospel. A realistic account of what the Christian life involves in both blessings and hardships must be given to prospective questioners. Should a profession of faith be made it will then have been made for the right reasons, with a full knowledge of what real discipleship means. Subsequently, those looking mainly for their own gain will, on the whole, be pruned out right at the beginning.

From this study, it is firmly established that suffering and tribulation tests the sincerity of a person's Christian profession. It challenges us to ensure that we build our lives on the right foundation. If we base our lives (or identity) on anything other than Jesus, we are likely to fall apart and land ourselves in a very ugly mess. For our sake heed the warning of these words. Please note that such warnings are given because Christ loves us.

Fourth reading From Hebrews 4:15

Chorus: Restore, Oh Lord, the Honor of Your Name

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkYRNs4C9OA>

Application

Whilst acknowledging our complete dependence upon Christ, our next stage in spiritual growth is to understand and apply the elementary teachings [or first principles] of Christianity, (Hebrews 6:1-3)

These are: -

1. Repentance from dead works, which stem only from human initiative and pride
(Psalm 127:1-2, Mark 7:1-23, Luke 18:9-14, Ephesians 2:2-3 & Philippians 2:3)
2. Faith – a humble trust in God, which comes through hearing, reading and obeying His Word,
(Psalm 37:5, Lamentations 3:22-23, Daniel 11:32-33, Romans 10:17, & Hebrews 11:6)
3. The doctrine [teaching] of Baptisms [total immersion] in water, in the Holy Spirit and in suffering
(Matthew 3:11, 20: 21-23, 28:19, Acts 2:4, 10:48 & 2 Timothy 3:12)
4. The '*Laying on of Hands*' for healing, commissioning for service and the impartation of blessing
(Mark 5:41, 8:25, 16:17-18, Acts 13:2-3, 1Timothy 4:14 & 5:22)
5. The Resurrection of the Dead – in order to meet God in new physical bodies
(Job 19:25-26, Daniel 12:2, Luke 14:14, John 5:29, 11:24, Acts 23:6 & 1 Thessalonians 4:16)
6. Eternal Judgement for all those having actively or passively rejected God
(Isaiah 66:24, Matthew 8:12, Luke 16:26, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, Revelation 20:15 21:8)

On the strength given to you, respond to the Gospel that was witnessed to you earlier in the service. Ask Christ to come into every aspect of your life invite him to Lord of your heart and soul. Accept that only He can provide you with the forgiveness, inner resources and spiritual regeneration needed to live out a flourishing life as the people you were meant to be. Christ's free offer of eternal life is there to be received so please hurry to take this precious gift.

Fifth reading From Revelation 3:10-13

Exhortation

With these encouraging words from Revelation in mind, May we now grow into maturity by taking to heart these foundational teachings, building upon them further through prayer and regular participation

in [the sacrament of] Holy Communion. May we continually appreciate that Jesus alone is our Great High Priest – His death having abolished the need for any other form of propitiatory sacrifice [designed to appease an angry God]. In addition, let us be joyfully aware that Jesus is in Heaven interceding for us, continually pouring out His strength and grace, (Hebrews 7:25f).

Even now He is hearing and actively responding to our prayers, answering them in ways we cannot always imagine.

1. Spiritual regeneration (being '*born from above*' by the Holy Spirit)
2. Sound knowledge and application of basic biblical doctrine
3. Self-honesty about our sins and weaknesses
4. Self-knowledge about our talents and strengths
5. Spiritual discernment, to avoid deception and to find the will of God
6. Submission to God's will, on a day-by-day basis
7. Self-correction; learning from our mistakes and not persisting in them
8. Study of God's Word and other relevant material, enabling us to serve Him better in this World
9. Sacramental participation in the rite of Holy Communion
10. Sung prayer and worship to add beauty to our devotion
11. Sin '*management*' wherein, relying upon on God's grace, we mortify and subdue our many sins
12. Sociability, whereby we engage with and learn from other people

Chorus: On The Victory Side

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_sVrtZIDddI

CLOSING PRAYERS

Be wise! Follow these ways and in the power of the Holy Spirit go out to show God's love [the love of Jesus] to a fallen world

This we will do, whilst relying upon God's strength

All: Oh Lord, teach us to depend upon your grace alone, so we can grow and become effective witnesses to you. Please do this for the exaltation and glorification of your great name, Amen

Remember, true freedom is to be found only in humble submission to God; for to go our own way in life is to court disaster *Be not children in your understanding, but in your understanding be men,* for *“you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free”* [from the bitter slavery of sin] (1 Corinthians 14:20 & John 8:32)

Lord Jesus, send your Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth so that we can enjoy true freedom and the ability to honour your Father in every area of our lives, Amen (John 16:13)

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, .

As you begin to re-enter the World, take great comfort from the following words, which Jesus said: *"I do not pray that you [Father] should take them out of the World, but that You should keep them [My disciples] from the evil one,"* (John 17:15). In addition, be fortified by His faithful and everlasting promise, which states: *"I am with you always, even to the end of the World,"* (Matthew 28:20b).

So ...

**May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God our Father and
The fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, forevermore, Amen"(2 Corinthians 13:14)**

Praise you Father, bless you Jesus, thank you Spirit, Glory Alleluia, Amen

Handel's Messiah: Hallelujah Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LajyjD0nzF4>

Open for Discussion