

LONGING

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Mark 13:24-27

If there is one emotion associated with Advent, it is surely the feeling of longing. And this is the emotion which has been burning in Asaph when he wrote this song, a song written in the period when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. *“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”* So he cries out in his refrain, not once but three times.

Longing. It is not something that can be ignored. It is a burning desire, which chokes off all other emotion. Asaph, who seems to have been a latter day David, who spoke and sang what the people as a whole were feeling, is all burned up inside with his longing that God come and rescue his people.

“Let your face shine” he says. And this reference to the way the Moses’ face shone when he met with God on the mountain and then in the holiest place in the tabernacle, tells us that what he is looking for is nothing less than a second exodus. He is looking for God to raise up someone like Moses, with whom he will deal face to face, who will lead his people out of exile and back to the promised land.

Last weekend I was in Prague, at the celebration of the 90th birthday of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. While I was there I heard something of the history of Protestantism in that part of the world. One speaker outlined the lives led by people “After the battle of the White Mountain”. This battle, part of the great 30 Years War of central Europe, was fought in 1620, and the victory of the Holy Roman Emperor meant that Protestants were not to be tolerated in the lands which we now know as the Czech and Slovak republics - Bohemia and Moravia in those days. For almost two hundred years, protestant Christians were persecuted; rather in the way that some of our forefathers were persecuted in the (overlapping) time of the Covenanters. People were afraid, they didn’t know who they could trust. To possess books - almost any books, but especially the Bible and books by the Czech reformer, Jan Huss - was evidence enough of heresy. In Bohemia and Moravia, if you were not Roman Catholic you could not hold property, practice a trade or meet in groups. The fine for non-attendance at the Mass was 4 gold coins - a very large sum.

As in Scotland the people met in cellars and conventicles, though in that part of the world they did not fight for their faith as people did hereabouts. But during that time of persecution, the people knew what they were longing for. When they read this psalm, and prayed the prayer of Asaph, they knew that they were longing for relief, for the freedom to meet and worship, to study Scripture and take Communion without fear. And they prayed for deliverance.

Throughout the time of the Covenanters, whatever you think of their guerrilla tactics, we can be sure that what they prayed for was the right to meet and worship freely and without fear.

The people of Israel longed to be sent home, where they could, they hoped, live and worship freely and without fear.

What is it that we long for? Here we are in Advent again, that time of preparation and longing, and what do we long for?

If we were to pray this prayer of Asaph, what would be in our minds as we say “Restore us, O God”? Here we are, meeting in Fountainhall hall, where this church used to meet regularly. Are we asking that God take us back to how things were in the

past? That is certainly one way of looking at things.

But there is another way of looking at it. If you are unlucky enough to catch the flu, or perhaps bronchitis this winter, then you know that you are going to feel pretty bad. There will be specific symptoms of shivering and headache and sore throat, and perhaps breathlessness, and fever, and for a few days you will feel rotten. But in time these symptoms will go and you will feel more like yourself - until you jump up and try to rush around doing all your usual things. It's at that stage after an illness that most of us realise that we are not as better as we thought that we were. We may be all right but we are still weak. And what we look for is a restoration of our full strength.

And that is the other way we can look at this advent prayer. "Restore us, O God, give us back the strength we lack, restore us to what we ought to be." I prefer to think of it that way, rather than as asking God to make things the way they were in the past. For one thing, I can't see that God ever does take us back in time! So to ask to go back can never be in God's will. Asaph knew this. See how he promises that this time they will never turn back from God (v:18). He knew that they could not go back to the way that things were. The Jews who in Jesus' day were waiting for the Messiah had forgotten this lesson, for many of them were waiting for God to send his servant who would make things like they used to be (before the pesky Greek and Romans were around). But when God sent Jesus he was doing a new thing.

Even if as a church we feel that we have lose ground, by going back we will not regain it. We may try to go back, but the world has moved on and so in terms of our mission, of our usefulness to God, we will have gained nothing. God always leads us forwards from where we are, not from where we wish we were. God leads us on from where we are geographically, physically, but also from where we are in terms of our faith, in terms of our activity as a church, in terms of the people who make us up as a church. There may be times when we want to say, "If only things were different now, if only we had more people like so-and-so - more children, more young people, more people who aren't so busy or whatever - how much better we could go forwards then."

But God knows us as we are not. He comes to us as and where we are now. He doesn't demand that we first become different before he can meet and use us: he comes to us and urges us onward together with him.

God will answer this advent prayer, that he restore us. He longs to restore us - to faith, to faithfulness, to knowing him.

Tribulation can come in many forms. For the Jews it was exile, for the Moravian brethren, for the covenanters it was overt persecution, at the end of time, Jesus says that it will be in natural disaster. But for us, today, there is still tribulation, things from which we pray for deliverance, things about which we pray for wisdom and clarity. Tribulation to us comes in the daily, often subtle things that pull us away from our faith. It comes in the assumption that faith is old-fashioned. It comes in the assumption that faith is a add-on, something extra, something that can be tacked on to a life or left off, with little difference resulting. It comes in a society that no longer makes room for faith, and the outward practice of faith in worship as a given, so that coming to worship on a Sunday is something that can be chosen from among so many other activities. Oh yes, we suffer from our own forms of tribulation, and they are the more insidious because it is possible to be unaware of them.

It is in our tribulation that we ask God to restore us to give us strength, so that we can deal with the situation in which we find ourselves, so that we can remain

faithful, so that we can be saved. It is in our tribulation too that Christ will come to call those whom he has chosen, the elect, those who are faithful to him. He will come and he will restore us - not to any position in the world, but to our rightful positions in his Kingdom. That is why he came, after all, not just to put things right for us in this world, but to mend the whole purpose of creation. And so he will restore us to strength and to our places as God's children in God's Kingdom. He will bring us face to face with God, so that our faces too may shine with his reflected glory.

And so this advent we allow ourselves to long, not only for Christmas, but for God to come and restore his people to strength, to purpose, to faith and faithfulness and to our proper places as his children in the Kingdom of our heavenly Father.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Amen.