

Thought for the Week 9th August 2020

Psalm 130

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; ² Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Are you "up in the clouds" or "down in the depths" today - or maybe you're somewhere in between? Funny, isn't it, that we always think of "up" as being positive and "down" as being negative; that heaven is "up there" and hell is "down below."

Psalm 130, first sung by the pilgrims of old as they made their way uphill to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, was perhaps sung as an act of confession of their sins and also a celebration of the mercy and forgiveness of God. It is just as relevant to us today as we come to God in worship.

From Death to Life (v 1-2)

On the odd occasion when it is possible, I like a swim in the sea (looks like it will be very unlikely on staycation this year!). Just very occasionally I have swum out a bit and suddenly realised that the beach has shelved away quickly and I can't put my feet down. It's not a nice feeling, and surely knowing that you are drowning must be the most awful feeling.

In the first of several dramatic pictures the psalmist realises that he is in the depths and without God's merciful intervention he would perish. He leaves open the question of what these depths are for us to put in our own situation, but there can be no doubt that sin. Like a heavy weight drags all of us down to the depths - cut off from God, which is of course the biblical picture of hell. The only hope is that the Lord will hear the psalmist's cry.

From Guilt to Forgiveness (v 3-4)

Then in verse 3 the picture shifts to the courtroom. At the minute I am enjoying the re-runs on ITV3 of Law & Order UK starring Bradley Walsh. In these fictional dramas, it is usually obvious that the person the police have caught is guilty. And so it is with us before the Judge of all the world. As the psalmist says, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O lord, who could stand?" True isn't it - standing before God we won't be able to argue our case or have a clever barrister to try to get us off. All we can do is say, "Yes, I have sinned, it was all my own fault, I deserve my punishment."

Now look what it says in verse 4. It begins with what surely must be one of the greatest words in scripture. With just 3 letters the word 'but' may seem insignificant but it certainly isn't. Verse 4 is one of those very important "buts" - BUT with you there is forgiveness. In Law & Order UK the judge never says to the accused, "You have been found guilty, but I forgive you, you are free to go."

The good news is that God is ready, willing and able to forgive. The psalmist knew this long before the full story of God's willingness to forgive human sin came to pass in the death of his son, the Lord Jesus on the cross. Another psalmist says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103). Isn't that wonderful news - news that lifts us out of the depths and puts us back on the height with God where we truly belong? St Augustine had the words of verse 4 written on the wall of the room where he lay dying. Martin Luther was pointed by the Psalm to find in the writings of Paul, the great doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

From Darkness to Light (v 5-6)

John Wesley attended a service in St Paul's Cathedral in London on the afternoon of 24th May 1738 and heard the choir sing this psalm, the De Profundis. Then later that evening his heart was "strangely warmed" and he gave his life to Christ at a society meeting in Aldersgate Street. They and the psalmist and many, many, others "waited on the Lord and in his word put their hope," (as verse 5 says).

What about you? Are you still in the depths? Are you like the watchmen pictured in verse 6, peering out into the darkness, watching for enemies, longing and hoping for the light of dawn to come? If you know that sin still has you trapped in darkness, all you have to do confess that sin and put your trust in God through his son Jesus. When God forgives your sin, it is like the dawning of a brand new day.

From Bondage to Freedom (v7-8)

Finally, there is just a hint of another picture placed before us in the final 2 verses in the word "redemption." There has been much in the media recently about the slave trade with the Black Lives Matter protests spilling over into vandalism of statues of former slave-traders. While of course we do not in any way condone what was done in enslaving fellow human beings, we have to acknowledge that it was very much part of the culture in former days and certainly was common in Biblical times. The only way a slave could be set free was that a price was paid. That's the meaning of the word redemption. A price had to be paid to ensure freedom, just as if you put your gold ring into the pawnbroker you had to pay a price to get it back. God is a redeeming God. When we could do nothing for ourselves, he paid the price for our sin with the blood of his Son the Lord Jesus, so that we could be free.

Four great pictures in the little psalm of what God does for us. He, and he alone is the one who can bring us from Death to Life, from Guilt to Forgiveness, from Darkness to Light and from Bondage to Freedom. So, if you haven't done so already, can I urge you to do what the psalmist says in verse 7: "... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption."