

WEEK 5: SUNDAY

The deep distress we sense as we read this Psalm has, paradoxically perhaps, given great hope to millions down the years. No matter how deep we have sunk, no matter what sorrows or tragedies we may encounter, the Psalms have been there before us. Not only do they encourage us to believe that we have not, after all, fallen off the map. They give us words so that, when our own words fail to do justice to our misery, they will do instead.

The Psalm doesn't hide. There's no point pretending, putting a brave face on it before God. (By the way, if you're reading this Psalm today in a bright, cheerful mood, pray it on behalf of the many for whom today is dark and sorrowful.) 'Out of the depths!' That's how it is, for all of us some of the time, for some of us most of the time. Let's tell it like it is.

Worse: the poet has a sense that somehow it's his own fault. When disaster strikes and it's someone else's fault, we can gain some relief by blaming them, perhaps hoping for justice. But when it's my own fault, even in part, the blame turns back on me. That is the road to the deepest depths of all, where we are not only miserable but feel guilty. Depression often takes the form, as a medical friend once said to me, of putting ourselves on trial and acting as judge, jury and chief prosecution witness all rolled into one. We then lock ourselves in the dungeon of our own misery and throw away the key.

It is out of that sense of helpless and hopeless sadness that the poem cries out: Lord, hear my voice! Listen! If you keep a record of wrongdoing, we'd all be in deep trouble; but what you offer is forgiveness! That's why we worship you! The news of forgiveness, of a free pardon, is the best news of all. The lock is broken; the prison door stands open; we are free to go.

It hasn't happened yet. The Psalm ends with redemption, forgiveness, still in the future. Yet the strong affirmation of God's forgiving kindness in verse 4 is the anchor which then, despite all, holds us upright. Then it's a matter of hope and patience: 'waiting', three times repeated in verses 5 and 6, is where it's at. 'Lord, give me patience,' says the T-shirt, 'and I want it right now!' But what matters here is the waiting, the settled concentration on God's word which alone assures us that there is hope because God is gracious.

As we journey through Lent, all sorts of things may have come up to test us, to make us despair. There is some way still to go, but we know who it is we're following. By the end of the Psalm, the poet is strong enough to commend to the whole nation the path of patience he himself is treading. 'O Israel, hope in the Lord; with the Lord there is steadfast love; he has great power to redeem.' He doesn't say what form the rescue will take. He only knows who it is that will provide it.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, when we are in the depths, come to us with your mercy and assure us of your power to rescue. And give us the patience to wait for you to do it.