

## PSALM 90

How did you feel on Thursday when you heard that Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated? I admit that I felt no great sense of surprise, it seemed to have been coming for some time in Pakistan; perhaps there was also a sense of resignation? What I did feel was a sense of how fleeting life is, that here was someone who one minute was looking forward to doing things for her people and in whom many people were putting a great deal of store for Pakistan and its relationship with the world and next minute she is gone and all these hopes and expectations are snuffed out in that minute. I suppose there have been lots of these moments in the history of the world; perhaps my sadness is that they keep happening! All kinds of events do this for us: these world events affect many people because they are so public events, but events like this happen in our own lives as well and you know well enough what these events might be! What effect do they have on us? How do we deal with these events?

There is a bit of a debate about when Psalm 90 was written; it has a title above it 'Prayer of Moses, man of God' but these titles were added to the Psalms later. There are all kinds of times in Israel's history when the themes ring true. It could ring true for the people in the days when they were slaves in Egypt in the early days of Moses and so it could indeed be Moses' prayer; it could be the time of exile when the people were looking to find new hope after the time when they were away from home and a homeless and rootless people. "The Psalm is about a people in decline, tired and time-worn." (Wilcock) This that makes it timeless, because it has something to say to the people of God in every generation. Is this about the Church of Scotland, or our lives or Western society and its attitudes to the values and standards of life?

The middle part of the psalm is all about our frailties; it makes for quite depressing reading in a way. The Psalmist talks about our physical frailties; none of us lives for ever. He paints a very bleak view of life as full of sorrow and hardship, compounded by our sense of sin, guilt and failure. All in all, here is a picture of a people who are rootless, homeless, and looking for peace and hope. This is not a million miles away from the attitude to life that many people have in our society today; it is quite a negative view of the world and of their life; there is no sense of belonging or acceptance, but a sense of striving to find these things, to make ourselves acceptable to ourselves or other people; or to find a relationship that will give people a sense of belonging to another person and so find meaning and purpose in life. This may seem depressing, yet this is also the reality of life.

The real strength of Psalm 90 is in its bookends. At either end of the Psalm, with all its frailties in middle, is a great declaration of God as the One on whom His people depend and rightly so because He is able to help, strengthen and bless His people time and time again, over and over again. Here is where this becomes good news for us: life in all its frailties and uncertainties can be a frightening thing, or at very least unsettling; we feel that, people we know feel that; there are times when we are that people who feel "in decline, tired and time-worn!" Yet, God is not like that; we have

reasons to trust God; He is help and strength of His people and here's why! God does not change and decay; time does not bear Him away; He does not die! "*Jesus Christ...*" (*Hebrews 13:8*)

Bookend number 1: "*Lord, you...*" (v1) Where do you belong? Belonging is a strange concept; we tend to answer that question as the place we were born. "I belong to..." yet we may not have lived there for many years; we understand 'belong to' as place we come from. Yet, for those of us who were born somewhere and have not lived there for 30 yrs or more, we can't really say we belong there any more. Can we develop a sense of belonging to the place in which we presently live? How long does that take to develop? We lived in Caithness for 17 years; others had lived there for more than 25 years and still felt like an incomer. Some people now move about so much that they have no sense of belonging anywhere and so become quite rootless; for them the notion of belonging anywhere becomes strange. Yet, we should develop a sense of belonging wherever we are. Here's a much deeper sense of belonging for Christian: we belong to God; God is our 'habitation, dwelling-place, home'. This is not about heaven when we die; this is about God being our home now; about us belonging to God and God making us His very own people. He is our dwelling-place; He is the One in whom live and find our peace, our security, sense of ease.

God, the eternal One, who lives for ever, who "*before the...*" (v.2) – this is our God, the One in whom we find our sense of belonging and our sense of being at home. The whole notion of God as everlasting is that He is untouched by time. All that changes for us, all that decays and grows old – none of that touches the eternal God; He is the same yesterday, today, forever and so is always able to be for us what we need. For generations of believers, God has been like this; for Israel in Egypt as slaves and longing for freedom, God was their dwelling-place; for Israel in prosperous times, when life was good and her kings were strong, God was still there; when they were in exile in Babylon and couldn't sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land so deep was their despair, God was still their dwelling-place; for Jesus; for the Church in its vibrant days God was there; for the Church in the West when it is feeling the pinch of decline and secularism around us and faith is hard and our values are challenged – God is our dwelling-place, the One who is with us, with whom we are most at home, and He is able to help us.

Bookend number 2: The other bookend is a series of prayers that express a deep sense of hope in God, that He will continue to be what He has always been. "*Teach...*" (v12) – this is about how to live our life well, in faith and good deeds, how to make right choices and go right ways so that we make most of our days. "*relent...*" (v13) longing for God to have compassion on His people again. "*satisfy us...*" (v14) there is enough in this Psalm to bring the spirit down and to see life as hopeless, but God's love is new every day, His love never fails, and His is a love that is committed, covenant love, love enough to satisfy us each and every day and bring a sense of joy and gladness to His people all over again. "*Make us...*" (v15) joys to balance sorrows? The New Testament takes this further and promises that "*our light...*" (2 Cor 4:17) "*May...*" (v17) Here is a real heritage for our children; here is real delight for

us, that God's work will stand for ever and that our labour is not in vain. What God has done will not fade away or decay, but His work will stand for ever; so our labours are not in vain either, but will be fruitful and will find their reward.

There is a recent Tearfund survey that tells us that one in five people believe that prayer changes the world. One in three people believe that God answers prayer. Take these words of Psalm 90 home with you and use them as your prayer for the future, whether that is tomorrow, 2008, or the rest of your life: that God will teach us to be wise in way we live; that God will be compassionate on us again; that His love will satisfy us every new day; that we will pass on the splendour of God to others, including our children; that God's favour will rest on us day after day and that He will continue to be at work in us every day. Make these notions your prayers for tomorrow; as we do that God becomes our dwelling-place, the One who gives us a sense of peace and security, the God who gives us everything that we need. We need not frame these prayers into any other words than the words that Psalm 90 uses; simply take these words and make them your own and pray them every day this week and let them shape the way we see God, the way we see ourselves, the way we see tomorrow.

Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus; I wonder whether they were feeling tired, and time-worn! Look at notions Paul concentrates on in his prayer: "*keep ...*" (*Ephesians 1:17*) "*you may...*" (*1:18f*) Wisdom, hope, riches, power, strength – these are qualities for which Paul prays for Christians in Ephesus. That suggests to me that there were times when these were the qualities they needed because they were lost, they did not know which way to turn, they were downcast, feeling poor, weak, and vulnerable. Paul's remedy – to remind them of what God is like, what God had given them and what God would continue to do for them day after day.

God has not gone away; He is with us always; today, here in worship; tomorrow, wherever we will be then and whatever circumstances; the next day and every day of 2008. Every day He will be our dwelling-place; every day His love will satisfy us; every day He will be full of compassion for us; every day He can inspire us to love and good deeds, which are not in vain. We must learn all over again to love and trust the Lord and learn to do that every day. God knows the end from the beginning; He is the eternal, everlasting God; we are frail, vulnerable people who make mistakes and get things wrong. We must learn to trust God, to know that He is our dwelling place and to pray the prayers!