

PSALM 89:1-8  
JESUS STANDS FIRM

These are early days; the new young king is on the throne and is setting out to be a good king. It has been a rocky road even to get to the throne; there must have been a time when he thought it might not happen, his enemies get in the way, circumstances go against him. But here he is, the new king on the throne, God has promised and that promise has come true and David is setting out to be a good king. He has a project in mind, there is something lacking, something that needs to be done; God needs a temple and David is the man to build it and the light is green from the people whose advice he values most. "Go on; what a good idea; God will be pleased!" But shortly afterwards, the mood of his advisers changes and the word is different; "God is not sure that you're the man for that job"; what a disappointment! There is something even harder when it seems as if these disappointments actually come from God, with God closing the door. On the other hand, God will build a dynasty; our new king will be the first in a long line; his sons and their sons and so on will sit on the throne after their most famous King!

Psalm 89 takes us back to these first days of David being king, to the start of David's reign over Israel as their greatest ever king! There is a mix of excitement, tinged with disappointment about the temple. Psalm 89's concentration is not so much on David, though; Psalm 89 makes us look at the qualities of God that come to support and sustain David as King. He discovered early on, even before becoming king, that being king will not be easy; there will be enemies to deal with; there will be battles to fight; there will be rivals to take care of, even from within his own family; there will be decisions to make, priorities to set, a kingdom to build. How can David cope with this? How can he get beyond this beginning to the second day, the second year? Many starts are like that; there is a good first day, first week, but then they have to come to the second year and sustain the start; there is a phenomenon called 'second year syndrome'; he needs to build for the long term. How do we do that? There is a new job, a new house, a new relationship - it's not so much about the start, though that matters, but it's about how it continues and carries on and grows and develops beyond the first flush of enthusiasm and energy.

*"I will sing..." (Psalm 89:1f)* These are the qualities of God that are to be celebrated. God promises to David right at the very start of his kingship that His covenant love, unfailing love and commitment and faithfulness would sustain David all the days of his life. Five times in these opening four verses, the psalmist takes the idea of how long this love and faithfulness will last; "for ever" three times and "through all generations" twice. God's love and faithfulness are not short-term fixes for the good days or disappointments; God's love and faithfulness are permanent qualities and He loves us and is faithful to us constantly. If you read the whole of Psalm 89, you will discover that God's love and faithfulness are severely tested by a people who decide to walk away, not to go God's way; will God still love them and be faithful to them? There would be times when it seemed to them that He had stopped, when the nation's fortunes fell. But the testimony of Psalm 89 is that God's love and faithfulness are for ever, are permanent qualities, tested by our waywardness, tested by our circumstances, but standing firm through all of that. At the end of his life, David still knew that God loved him and that God was faithful!

2015 will be a year of new starts for some of us. Someone in your family might be getting married in 2015 and already there is a sense of stress building up! You might move house in 2015 and have to settle into a new place. There might be a new job in 2015 and have to adapt to a new working pattern and new people to work alongside. All kinds of new things will happen and we will have to face up to them. For some this

might be a new beginning in Christian faith, making a new commitment to Christ, to follow Him. How will we cope? That's the question we always ask in these circumstances; we're not sure how we'll get on with it all. Beware anyone offering easy answers or easy assurances; life is far too complex for easy answers, but let me offer you something deeper from Psalm 89.

There are three notions, each one building on the other, that give us an idea of where our hope and help lie.

**1. God's faithfulness** - "*w/my mouth...*" (*Psalm 89:1b*) This is the steadiness of God, His firmness; Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. With that sense of steadiness comes reliability and dependability. God is not fickle. He is not changeable as the wind, but is steadfast, firm, resolute.

**2. God's lovingkindnesses** - "loving kindness" is seen as a great quality, both in people and in God. Here it is plural: the Psalm celebrates God's lovingkindnesses to David, the very individual ways in which that great quality is seen in his life. David can look back and see the particular ways in which God has been kind to him in the past and rejoice and tell the world of these kindnesses; the evidence of these kindnesses in the past stokes up his faith for the future.

**3. God's covenant love** - covenant is one of these bible words, an old-fashioned word now, but a great word when it comes to understanding what God is like and what God has done. God makes promises: to the young king David, God promised a dynasty, promised that there would always be someone on throne, and promised to help and sustain him. But covenant is more than promise, covenant is commitment. So God makes these promises, and covenant means He is committed to keeping them.

We have a God who is steady and steadfast; we have a God from whom we have received lots of lovingkindnesses already - look for them and you'll see them; we have a God who is committed to our well-being and our blessing. This is our God. But "*How long...*" (*Psalm 89:46*) God has gone away; God has rejected His people and forgotten to bless them, or so it would appear; God has left them helpless, so they think. Here's the thing: there are times when we have a deep emptiness and a sense that God has gone away, that this super-steadfast and reliable God has become steadfast and reliable no longer, but has left us, has deserted us and we angrily cry out "how long, O Lord!" We see both of these emotions within the compass of one Psalm: the early confidence and the later complaint! All of our emotions are here. There is something of a mystery here, but it simply reflects the fact that our world is complex, and we are complex, but God has not gone away. God has not changed, but our raw emotions are real. These raw emotions even more so when it seems as if God is at the root of our disappointments.

Brian D'Arcy is one of the people who contributes to Radio 2's Thought for the Day; I heard him on Monday reflect on the year that is past. He spoke of the start to 2014 as being especially hard because he was diagnosed with cancer and was convinced this year would be his last. It is not the best start to a new year, but he is still alive and his worst fears have not come true. He talked about the year as being a mix of good things and hard times; he learned the meaning of the word "gratitude" because his eyes had been opened to see the good things in life that God had given him. Amongst other ideas for 2015, he wants to have enough faith to keep him hopeful. Being thankful, having faith, being hopeful - these sound small targets, but they are a good response to God!

How would you begin the story of the Messiah? You want to start with some great display of power; let's see a great miracle; let's show how strong the Messiah is; here's someone to believe in as a great King? You want to make the best impression

on your audience, to make a good bold start and then people will be with you from the outset. Interestingly, both Matthew and Luke start the story of Jesus the Messiah in a very different place, with a very different picture; they both start their picture of Jesus in the desert, with Jesus' faith being tested, with Jesus wrestling with a very different sets of emotions. "God can't want His beloved Son to be famished with hunger, can he? If God wants Jesus to become sovereign over all the world, then why not go for it in one easy stride? If Jesus is Israel's Messiah, why not prove it by spectacular displays of power?" (NT Wright) Yet, that's where Jesus starts, wrestling with the devil trying to distract him and derail Him from the ministry to which God has called Him. Yet, in the midst of that wrestling, the Spirit of God is there, supporting Jesus, bringing the Bible to His mind so that He can have an answer to these wrestles; God is there with Jesus in the desert.

We don't talk too much about the wrestlings that go on inside us. But they are there more often than we admit. We wrestle with doubts and questions, what we believe and what should we believe. We wrestle with "where is God when life is awful? Has He gone away or do we just not see?" We wrestle with ways to behave - "I want to... but something inside makes me do...!" We wrestle. Jesus wrestled. He is able to help us.

I can't offer you anything that will make life easy. If I could, I'd have done it a long time ago. I can offer you a steadfast God, who blesses us with lovingkindnesses and who has committed to love us come what may. I can point you to Jesus who began His ministry, wrestling with dark thoughts in the desert and who understands the deep and dark places we visit as we wrestle with life, anger, despair and hope. Maybe as 2015 goes along, we can learn afresh together what 'gratitude' means as we trust in our steadfast, kind God who loves us and in Jesus who walks with us.