

Psalm 13

1. How long will you forget me, O Lord; for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2. How long shall I have anguish in my soul and grief in my heart, day after day?

How long shall my enemy triumph over me?

3. Look upon me and answer, O Lord my God;

lighten my eyes, lest I sleep in death;

4. Lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed against him,'

and my foes rejoice that I have fallen.

5. But I put my trust in your steadfast love;

my heart will rejoice in your salvation.

6. I will sing to the Lord,

for he has dealt so bountifully with me.

Uniting People's Book

Let us Pray:

Come upon us now, O Holy Spirit,
and give us holy thoughts which are translated into prayer,
holy prayers which are translated into love,
and holy love which is translated into life;
for the sake of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

(Uniting in Worship II)

Psalm 13 expresses a range of emotions in a short intense timeframe.

The Psalm begins with a complaint against God.

Four times the Psalmist pleads:

How long O God?

Here is a real tension between faith in God and complaint to God.

Clearly the Psalmist is in a very difficult place.

Was he very unwell and at point of death? It was often thought that good health was a blessing from God, and it therefore followed that ill health must be a curse from God. We don't know if the Psalmist was unwell or not?

Was the psalmist in mortal danger by an imminent enemy? Again, it was thought that if you trust in God, you can defeat your enemies and their gods. So if *you* were defeated by an enemy, maybe your god was weaker than the god of the enemy. The Babylonians lorded it over the Hebrew people saying that their god Marduk, was more powerful than Yahweh.

During the first World War, both sides marched to God, King and Country. Each believing their god and king was better, when both sides had the same god, and the kings were related.

While the Psalm refers to the enemy, we don't know if the enemy is an illness, death, a family member or an approaching army.

But we do know that whatever strife the Psalmist was in, it was big, it was potentially life-threatening, and it was imminent.

When you are going through a difficult time, who do you turn to? When things are not going how we think they should in the church, who do we turn to? When your job is under threat, When your health is under threat, When your relationship, whether romantic or friendship or work colleague is at breaking point, when your life is under threat, Who do you turn to in a time of trouble? When organisational and even societal structures are corrupted and power is abused, who do we turn to?

During Covid, it would seem many Australians turned firstly to . . . toilet paper. Go figure?

Then Australians turned to online gambling.
Family and domestic violence increased,
High numbers of relationships have broken down.

Immediately the clubs reopened,
there was a spike in gambling.

Christ has been described as priest, prophet, king.
Jesus as priest is the mediator who through his ministry, cross and resurrection brings God's forgiveness and new life.

As king, a servant king, Jesus protects and defends the people of God and claims their obedience and service.

As prophet, referred to in the Gospel today,
Jesus instructs and guides believers in the will of God and exposes idolatry, injustice,
and violence that rule in all the domains of human life.

The church always has an activity of teaching God's will made known in Christ, denouncing injustice and oppression as opposing God's will.

Lately people have been crying out to God:
how long O Lord?
How long before women are treated as equal and not playthings?
How long before people with skin colour other than white are treated equal?

I think those voices are prophetic voices. The voices might be full of pain, emotion, but a prophetic voice nonetheless calling on those with power to do something about the inequality.

Males have been challenged with our treatment of women. In particular, sexual assaults, where a male in positional power has abused that power to assault women.

The #MeToo movement has been empowering for women, though only a start has been made. I'm sure it has been uncomfortable for many women to have to take a stand against the powerful. I'm sure that many women will be concerned to ensure significant change happens.

#MeToo challenges all men, regardless of their skin colour. Many men feel uncomfortable, and rightly so. As a male, when those issues are brought to our attention, how do we respond? What ought to be our first response, particularly as Christian males?

As is often the way, the first response is to deny there is a problem, to diminish the extent of the problem, and to blame the victim. Get angry to get even.

Listening to women talk about how they have to ensure they go for a walk in the daylight and not walk alone at night, is uncomfortable to hear, but hear it we must. Hearing can be the start of an uncomfortable journey to enlightenment about gender issues.

And sometimes, of course, when issues have been repressed by the victims for so long, generations, the opportunity to voice it comes with a rush of hot emotion. That is hard to hear, but hear we must. It is uncomfortable for all of us, women and men, for different reasons.

When we hear those things that make us uncomfortable, who should we turn to first?

The Black lives matter movement is uncomfortable for white people, both white women and white men.

I suspect it is also uncomfortable for many people with skin colour other than white. It takes a huge effort to raise an issue of injustice with the dominant culture. To name and challenge the powers is a risky matter.

For those who are white, male and middle aged, and therefore in a privileged position in this society, to be challenged about racism and gender inclusion can be deeply confronting. Who do we turn to?

On some issues we will be part of those who raise the issue, and on other issues, we may be part of the dominant group having to listen. And it may happen at the same time, like #meto and Black lives matter.

Who do we turn to?

Let me be very clear. I think issues like these issues and many others besides need to be raised.

My question is how do we respond when those issues are brought to our attention? Pretend we don't know, that it did not happen, or blame the victim? When things go wrong in life, we can get angry, we can abuse someone, we can deny, we can blame, we can try to get even.

And we can go to God.

Psalm 13 lays out a pattern. I think the Psalm speaks to all of us. It speaks to the people with a prophetic voice to keep raising the issue. It also speaks to us who are in the dominant to listen, and also to go to God. How long before I change?

When stuff happens, an action of faith is to go to God, and vent, and pray.

In the prayer, the Psalmist fears he will break down under the burden of his suffering, which seems to go on forever. The Psalmist despairs that God may have forgotten him and struggles with his hope that he will be healed, restored, vindicated, saved. His first thought is his relationship with God. He reaches out in his prayer to God.

Our first action ought always to go to God. Of course, that is not going to happen if we don't already have a regular, daily prayer relationship with God. We will go to something and somewhere else.

Jurgen Moltmann said if we don't pray every day, we are living as atheists.

From contemplation of God the Psalmist's thoughts then turn to his heart and lastly to the enemy who gloats.

The Poet begins by feeling far from God but draws near to God through prayer.

The words "give light to my eyes" comprise the knowledge that comes by faith that the grace of God is the source of all life – both material and spiritual – and of the joy that life can give.

This psalm differs to many in that the Poet's concern with his enemy is not vengeance or vindictiveness but rather concern that he might lose faith and what impact this might have on his enemies.

The tone of the Psalm changes in verses 5, yet no physical healing has taken place. The worshipper has been assured of God's grace for which he yearned and prayed, and, trusting in that grace, he is able to disregard his suffering and look into the future.

The Psalm ends on the high note of the worshipper singing praises to God in gratitude of the joy of living in communion with God.

When God seems far away the natural inclination is to give up or to curse God and others,

but the Psalm suggests the answer is to pray. To pray at such times is difficult. The prayer will be dry and perhaps like dust in our mouth. It will be a cry for help that God will be revealed, "to give light to our eyes". Invariably that prayer for help is answered in the affirmative, although it may take some time. Our situation may not be different; we may still be in a difficult place. Yet, the situation will be different as we experience the presence of God.

It maybe that it takes time to get to praise. More than 6 verses of the Psalm. We may have to campaign to raise issues of injustice. We may have to upset the peace, the false peace, like the #meto and the Black Lives Matter campaigns, and other campaigns. We may face heckling, abuse, and worse. We may even get anger directed towards us from other members of the church. But if we draw on the deep resources in God we will find the strength to prevail – not our strength but the strength of God.

The psalm makes clear that making a protest is not to lack hope. Protesting to God is a movement towards and an action of hope. Protesting to God is a movement towards and an action of faith.

This is the prayer of a mature faith.

Our cry for help will become a cry of praise. The praise is not that we are miraculously healed. Not that the enemy is overwhelmed. Not that the campaign is completed. Covid is still here.

But, our cry of despair can be transformed into a voice of praise.

The psalm holds, protest, petition and praise together.

I am reminded of Robyn Mann's song

How long must we cry out
Till justice rolls down like a river?
How long will this night last,
And when will we all be together?
Teach me to do what is right:
Walk in the darkness, trust in the light
And may love be the path I walk upon.

We continue to protest, and petition and to praise God.

Let us pray:

We believe, O Trinity of Love,
that you are drawing us into your dance of life.
You fill us with the Holy Spirit
and call us to share in Christ's ministry –
living and praying for the world day and night
until your law of love
is written on the hearts of people everywhere
and the earth is full of justice, love and peace. Amen.

Keith Hamilton, 5 July 2020