

**Revival**

*Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-10*

Partly due to the heat, partly due to national and international politics, many people are in the doldrums. It's hard to be positive when coping with temperatures hotter than the Sahara, and with political leadership in many countries either in meltdown or stalemate.

It has been interesting in our own country to see the new Prime Minister seeking to energise the nation with not much evidence of what we are to be energised for and how it is going to be sustained in the undeniably difficult and dangerous times that lie ahead. Many find it difficult to know whether to give him the benefit of the doubt, and many more simply look at a track record that is less than encouraging.

I certainly found myself struggling to know what to think when one political commentator suggested we were being encouraged by politicians to lift ourselves up by 'belief alone', and would that be enough in these fractious times. It is an interesting theological, philosophical and political question. Is belief on its own ever enough? Or should we, must we, look for something more? I also wonder what is meant by saying our nation is 'standing on the brink of a new golden age'. Does my doubt make me a 'doomster' and a 'gloomster'? Or am I, and others, simply being realistic.

Opinion is divided on what Psalm 85 is for: is it a song of lament, or is it a prayer for hope? Or is it both? When it comes to God, how do you bridge the gulf between what you deeply believe to be true about God and the messy circumstances of real life? How does a situation of suffering, or injustice, or cruelty affect your beliefs about a relationship with God?

To a world facing difficult times this Psalm speaks a word of encouragement and confidence, but it does not shy away from the fact that troubles are real. It was written at a time of desperate trouble in Israel's history, when past glories were being remembered fondly in the midst of a present time of difficulty and disaster. The psalmist harkens back to a time of golden age glory when God's blessing seemed assured, but in his present day the glory of God seemed to have

departed. Once again what the psalmist does is give us words and ideas that speak of a real, lived-out experience. Here there is a community lamenting, but also as the lament works its way out, words speak of a hope-filled longing that God's blessing will come again, or be realised in a different way.

I don't know if we are on the verge of a golden era in this country, but I find myself drawn to the personal and community comfort this psalm offers. There are times when our lives seem in pieces. Work or relationships haven't worked out the way we thought they might. We might not be in crisis, but we weary of the dull, boring, drudgery of daily living. We wonder if we've done something to deserve our misfortune, or what we think of as our punishment. Those feelings are real and we shouldn't brush them under the carpet. It feels like God has turned away; it feels like God is angry with us, or our country, or our church.

The person of faith, however small or bruised that faith might be, knows that dark place. We only need to turn to the news to see the cliff-edge the country stands upon. We only need to look to our family or friends or people in the church to know how tough life really can be. We only need to look in the mirror to know that bleakness, and these long, hot days and nights only seems to add to our tiredness and despair. That's what these words in this psalm tell us. People have been hammered with losses and disappointments. The land is not producing, struggles abound, and the word on the street is that God is absent.

The psalmist also sees that the spiritual life of God's people is also pretty much turned to desert. "Like bread left unwrapped on a counter for several days, the people's hearts have grown stale and dry; they are muddling through their days with little sense of the fresh joy of God animating their lives."<sup>i</sup>

The people had forgotten to pray, or even how to pray. The people had forgotten how to relate to God, even in the hard times. Maybe that's what make hard times seem harder.

I tell you how it is with me when the hard times come, when the frustrations and disappointments at others, and at myself, weigh me down. At such times I feel almost driven to pray, because there's nothing else I can do. At such times I find myself reading Bible passages

more intently, because I can no longer find the words. And at such times I imagine God saying, “Ah, so you have come back. You do remember Me. How are things with you?” Corny? The kind of thing you’d expect, or hope, a minister might say? Maybe. But when I do this, something shifts in my soul and by being honest with myself, and with my God, I find the strength to go on, or the imagination to look at something differently, or the courage to ask for help. It has turned my life around on many occasions. It is what this Psalm reminds me of when I read it. Times are tough, for individuals, for the country, for the church, but...it is not over yet. It might not be a golden age, but person-by-person, small step by small step, for the individual, for the country, and for the church, things will change, and the awareness of God will grow again. It is no surprise to me that some of the darkest times we face personally, nationally, or as a Church, are at those times when faith and the practise of faith seems to be at a low ebb. Is this such a time? The psalmist acknowledges this, and he goes on to point again to the steadfast love of God which he still believes in. Revival, renewal, regeneration, call it what you will, will only truly come when we sort out our spiritual mess, when we sort out what our personal, national and church priorities are, then do something to shape them and live them out loud.

Perhaps before the living out loud, we need first to listen. The psalmist writes, “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak.” Our world is a crowded world with experts, politicians, economists, journalists, and clergy offering quick solutions to all that ails us, personally, nationally and globally. These voices pander to our fears and anxieties, and seldom yield peace. So when the Psalmist says ‘Let me hear’, it says to me, maybe to you, ‘when did you last stop and listen? To God, to the people in your life that you love and trust the most, and to yourself.’ “Let me hear...”

The word of God to the people of God is, “Peace”. In the midst of crisis and emotional turmoil or despair, God is attempting to say to us, to you, to me, “peace”. God isn’t silent. God isn’t at a distance, coolly debating whether to come to our aid or not. God is speaking, and God is acting, and God is prompting us to listen, and then to respond and to do something and to be

something that will change our little bit of the world, and maybe even a far bigger bit of the world. As God's people turn, God enthusiastically pours out blessings.

As I look at this country of ours, and the Church, and even my own life, I sense the same spiritual dryness and lethargy that the psalmist writing these words saw in his own time, two and a half thousand years ago. As a nation, as a Church, and as individuals we stand in need of revival. The realism of this ancient song we have been looking at gives us permission to come to God and say how grim it all feels, but also tells us that sorrow need not be the end of the story. I doubt it will be politicians, or churches, or philosophies of living that will ultimately save us; but God will. Psalm 85 calls us to lift up our eyes to see the divine energy and revitalising work of God that endures when everything else crumbles to the dust of false promise and empty rhetoric. Why does it take us so long to realise this, or to remember it, again?

“Let us hear what God wants to speak to us: words of peace, words of salvation, words that call us to turn, and turn again, to God.”<sup>ii</sup> Then go out there, and do something about it.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Lisa Lamb, Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 3, p277

<sup>ii</sup> ibid p279