

Funeral Homily on Psalm 61; 2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:5
July 2, 2014 D. Marion Clark

It is common for Christians to turn to the psalms in times of sorrow, if only because we find in them the very real emotions of others who knew God and trusted him, and yet nevertheless were not afraid to be honest with their God. And so Psalm 61 begins: “Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer.” This is the petitions of someone who felt very needy, and someone who had such a relationship with his God that he could be so direct and bold in his petition. In this case, he feels that he is at the end of the earth, or the metaphor we commonly use – at the end of his rope. He is faint. He can’t handle whatever it is he is going through. He needs help from his God.

He doesn’t call on God to assist him as we might ask a friend to give a helping hand. He is not asking God to supplement his efforts. Nor is he asking God to show him where to find help. He wants God himself. So when he asks God to lead him to the rock that is higher than he, he is asking God to lift him up onto God himself. Rock is a common metaphor for God in the psalms. In this case, the scenario is that of being in imminent danger – such as fighting enemies who are about to get the upper hand – and the psalmist, who is King David, needs to be lifted up high on a solid rock that takes him out of danger.

That image continues in verse three, this time with the metaphor of a strong tower that the psalmist can take refuge in. Rock, tower – these are images that denote firmness. When life is shaky, God is the solid rock and tower on which to keep our feet, to protect and steady us.

Then the metaphor shifts a bit. The psalmist still wants God to be his refuge, but now he speaks of a tent. Most likely David is referring to the tabernacle of God, which was literally a tent at the time. He wants to be dwelling with God; he wants to be in God’s presence. And then he moves to the most intimate of images – “the shelter of your wings.” It is the image of a mother hen gathering her children under her wings close to her breast. There, her chicks feel safe not only because of the protection of the wings but because they feel the love of their mother. They are safe with her.

David can speak in such a way to God because of God’s covenant love. David belongs to God’s people; he has shared in the vows of those people and thus shares in their inheritance, which is God.

God is our refuge. He is a refuge of strength, like a rock and a strong tower. And he is a refuge of intimate love, a place to come to rest in him, to even feel his love. It is a great psalm of comfort.

It is the next two verses, though, that do not seem to provide that intimate feel, and yet give the psalm a whole new meaning for us.

⁶ Prolong the life of the king;

 may his years endure to all generations!

⁷ May he be enthroned forever before God;

 appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!

Jewish religious teachers in the past, and many still today, took special notice of psalms referring to “the king,” seeing them to be Messianic psalms, i.e. psalms that spoke of the Messiah to come. Christian teachers look back on these psalms with the same perspective, this time informed by the cross. Think now of Jesus praying this psalm. He was beset by enemies. He endured trials; he grew faint. He sought the Rock, the Strong Tower; he prayed to dwell in the Tent and to be given refuge under his Father’s motherly wings. It seemed that his prayer was not answered upon the cross, and yet his life was prolonged through the resurrection, and he is now enthroned beside his Father.

Centuries later, a Jewish rabbi named Saul would have his life changed by the risen King Jesus Christ. His name would be changed to Paul. Like Jesus he suffered much and was persecuted. And yet he never gave way to despair, because he knew that God who raised the Lord Jesus would also raise him and everyone else who called on Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The resurrection of Jesus changed everything, especially the way that one looks at this earthly life with its burdens. In the 2 Corinthians passage, Paul also spoke of a tent, but he was speaking of our bodies. Our bodies suffer, they waste away eventually, they cause us to groan. As we grow older, they cause us to feel the transience of life. Nothing lasts forever.

But no, there are things that last forever, things that are not marked by pain but by glory. And those things are our bodies – not as they are in this life but as they shall be when we are received by our Lord, and even more when he returns. Then what is mortal will be swallowed up by life, by eternal life. What is sown in weakness will be raised in power. We will find, as Paul had faith that he would, that the troubles of our life is but light momentary affliction preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

That is the Christian hope. It is the hope that M possessed. Though he attended church growing up, as we all did, it was not until after college that the psychologist turned to his Lord to be his Refuge from his own sins. Indeed, the Lord would take such a hold on him that he left his good position in his beloved home state and spent the next thirty years on the other side of the country teaching students in a Christian university. I remember him dropping by our house in Kingstree, when he lived in Charleston and telling me about Biola. We had another conversation about the meaning of fearing God in the Bible. He said that it had to do with reverence, as one would show to a King.

M is now before his King who died for him, the King who rose again and is enthroned forever. The King who loves him and all his people with steadfast love and faithfulness.