**Psalm 44 Being Honest with God Sermon**

*Readings: Psalm 44 and Matthew 27:45-50*

We’ll look at this psalm in just a moment, but before we do I thought I would make just a brief digression… but I’m sure you won’t mind me doing so because it’s a digression to another part of the Bible, in fact a story from the Bible which I’m sure lots of us will be familiar with…

There isn’t time to go into all the details of the story this morning, but if you want to look it up you can find it in 1 Kings 18. It’s the story of the time when the prophet Elijah gets into a competition with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel… it’s a great story, it’s got drama, it’s got comedy, it’s got a happy ending… and what it all comes down is how the prophets of Baal and Elijah each get a bull and put it on an altar along with firewood and the winner, the top god, for want of a better expression, is the one who is able to call down fire from heaven.

And, of course, if you know the story you’ll be aware that the prophets of Baal can’t do it… even though there are 450 of them, even though they spend hours giving it all they’ve got, do lots of dancing, all their moves, they just can’t pull it off. And after they’ve spent the whole morning doing this, Elijah indulges in a bit of mickey-taking. Do you remember what he says?

**At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”**

**1 Kings 18:27**

It’s a great moment… and actually just an interlude in the story, because they spend the rest of the day seeing if they can get their gods to turn up and perform, but it doesn’t happen, the outcome of the story is never in doubt, there is one prophet who is able to summon fire and that’s Elijah because he is calling on the name of the God of Israel. It’s a great story, I’m sure I’m not the only person here who loves it… and especially that great moment when Elijah comes out with that zinger of a line… wake up your god… and we chuckle along, don’t we, because we know they can shout as much as they like and it just ain’t happening.

But here’s the thing… what do you do when it’s our God who doesn’t seem to be responding, when it’s our God who appears to be asleep on the job… because this is what we read about near the end of Psalm 44… let me remind you again of the words in question:

**Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.**

**Psalms 44:23**

What do you make of this? What are we to do? Because on one level, we all know this is not how things are meant to be. This is not what it says on the tin marked faith in God. There are statements in Scripture which run directly counter to this, statements we probably prefer, like the one we find in Psalm 121… remember that? ‘He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.’

And yet… and yet… here we find, in the songbook of Israel this line which says, ‘Come on God… wake up… get your act together… when are you going to deal with this issue I’m bringing to you.

And it’s here, in Scripture, Israel says it… and as Israel says it, so Israel, so the psalmist, offers us permission to say it. As I was thinking about this psalm, I remembered something I read years ago, some words from an interview which Bono, the lead singer of U2, gave. It was 2006 and not long after the papacy had passed to Pope Benedict. Bono’s a Catholic, and so the interviewer put it to him that Pope Benedict doesn’t like rock music. And this is what Bono said in reply:

**'I prefer the blues to gospel or punk rock to feel good dance music. There's an honesty to people owning up to their despair and that's what religion should be more like instead of this happy-clappy 'let’s pretend we're not all afraid of dying''**

I want to suggest that these words offer us a really helpful way into the aspect of prayer I want us to reflect on this morning – we’ve talked in recent weeks about how prayer is about drawing near to God, offering him our love and our adoration, ‘gazing on his beauty,’ as Denzil reminded us three weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 27. Then after Pentecost, we thought last Sunday about saying sorry to God, about the importance of confession and repentance within our relationship to God, how we need to be able to come before God and say that we’re wrong, that we’re sorry, that we love him.

And this week we’ll be thinking about something equally fundamental, the importance of honesty within prayer… this same thing Bono is getting at when we says religion ought to be about honesty. Church and approaching God ought to be about honesty… coming here is not about putting on our gameface or our Sunday best and projecting an image to the people next to us… it ought to be the place where we can be most real, most honest, most ourselves… it ought to be the place where we can tell it like it is, and not just in the conversations we have before the service or over tea and coffee afterwards, but during the service itself… we ought to be able to God about the times when God seems to be asleep as much as the times he’s come through for us.

And if you’re worried that you don’t have permission to be honest like this, let me suggest that you don’t need to look any further than Psalm 44…it’s all here… and it’s in lots of other psalms, the psalms that we often speak of as the psalms of lament, those were the people of Israel come before God and express, often in very raw and blunt terms, their anguish, their grief, their loss, their despair, psalms where they ask questions of God, like the one that begins Psalm 13: ‘How long, O Lord?’

For me one of the most telling details about these psalms of lament is how many of them there are: it’s been said that you can classify the psalms into various categories, psalms of praise, psalms which are the coronation of a king of Israel etc. When you look at these lists, you’ll find that there are 47 psalms which are categorised as psalms of lament. Just think about that number for a moment – almost one third of the psalms are songs of lament, of crying out to God.

What does that tell you about how the people of Israel worshipped? My guess is that if you went through Songs of Fellowship or did a survey of the songs written in the last 10 years you wouldn’t find many lament songs. Which is an issue… where do we find the songs which help us express our feelings about Covid or Ukraine? But we do find songs of lament here, in Scripture, in Israel’s hymn book.

Let’s spend a moment thinking now, in more detail about this particular song, about Psalm 44.

Another striking about this psalm is that it isn’t all about giving expression to loss. In fact, the start of the psalm doesn’t prepare you for what follows, it seems to begin like many others with an expression of praise and thanks, a looking back over the history of Israel and an offering of praise for what God has done for his people. You see this in verses 1-3, the praise and thanksgiving are very specific and linked to a particular event, to the Promised Land and the way God has given victory to his people and enabled them to conquer other nations.

And if you’re following along in your bibles, you’ll see that the first three verses are a giving thanks for this, and then from verses 4 to 8 there is a transition to a more generalised statement of confidence in God about how is the one they trust the one, they look to him to help them in other times of difficulty. Look at verse 6, for example:

**I put no trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory.**

**Psalms 44:6**

These opening verses are ones which offer so much in the way of hope, of confidence in God, a sense of how good and proper it is to put a confidence in him and not in ourselves or our own strength… there is all this talk of how God gives victory to those who follow him, and so it is fair to say that we are not prepared for what comes next, for how the whole tone of the psalm changes, and changes really dramatically, in verse 9:

**But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.**

**Psalms 44:9**

These are hard words to read… one commentator who I read on this passage suggests that the word *zanah*, which the NIV translates as ‘rejected,’ could even be translated as ‘spurned’ or ‘pushed away.’ And clearly this describes something desperate, the very thought that God, the one whose love and mercy is the one thing we feel we can rely on and depend on, the thought that he might reject us is just too awful to contemplate.

But this is what Israel speaks of in the verses that follow, they read almost as the exact opposite of what went beforehand. Where once the people were able speak of God’s faithfulness in times of war, the way he won their battles for them, now they seem doomed to defeat. And when you read these verses you are left in no doubt about who they see as being responsible… you read verses 9 to 12 through, have a look at them in your bibles if you have them open, and what you get is this whole series of ‘you’ statements, this is all pinned on God. And there is a rawness to what is written here, it is painfully direct. Look at verse 12 for example:

**You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.**

**Psalms 44:12**

Again, you can feel the sense of loss and frustration and almost bewilderment… you can see the thought processes whirring, the cogs spinning, the way in which the people of Israel are surveying the wreckage of what’s happened and can’t make any sense of it. One commentator who writes about this psalm is John Goldingay, he puts it all very bluntly:

**As the people puzzle over why events should work out in this way, they cannot even see how God gains from making them happen. Selling people is a nefarious deed, but there is a sense in which it is understandable when the seller gains significantly from it (Amos 2:6). But God has hardly gained anything from the sale. They have been put on eBay for a few cents, with no reserve.**

**John Goldingay**

And we might be reading this and thinking that we’ve just about reached the ground zero moment, that we’ve gone about as low we can go, and yet we discover that there is even worse to come. Look at verses 17 and 18:

**17 All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
18 Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.**

**Psalms 44:17-18**

These verses open up a next section of the psalm which speak of another dimension to the sense of bewilderment that the people of Israel are in, and if we’re honest it’s a place we can sometimes find ourselves in as well. We all know that there are times when we go through difficulty or disappointment, and it’s hard to deal with, but we can at least understand it, we can make sense of it because of something we’ve done wrong, or some mistake or bad choice we’ve made… we’ve all been in the place of asking God to be gracious and merciful and spare us the worst of the consequences of our mistakes.

But there are also times when it doesn’t make sense, when in good conscience we can say to ourselves, ‘I’ve said my prayers, I’ve trusted God, I’ve tried to do my best,’ and yet still things are not working out. I think there’s a sense in which lots of think in terms of cause and effect, we think that if things have gone wrong there must be a reason, a way of explaining it all away. But that’s not always the case, there are times when we go through real hardship and there doesn’t seem to be any reason why.

And it’s at moments like this that we need prayers like Psalm 44, prayers that remind us that worship is not about keeping up appearances, that we think we’re only allowed to say positive things, we feel it’s going to somehow spoil the party if we’re not positive. But look again at the psalm – this clearly is not Israel’s perspective. If Israel is disappointed with God, they will ‘have it out’ with God, to put not too fine a point on things. I think I’ve quoted before one of my favourite lines from the writing of Eugene Peterson:

**‘Cynics argue about God. Believers argue with God.’**

We need to be honest. There are lots of us who have come here this morning with reasons to be disappointed – why are we still sick? Why are our children sick? When will our job applications bear fruit? Why has the church in our country not seen revival? Why were things so difficult during the pandemic?

And we need to be able to do something with that, to take these hurts to God. These are not moments when singing ‘Shine Jesus shine’ covers everything we want to say.

You read Psalm 44, and you read others like it, these prayers of lament, and what constantly comes across is this sense that the psalmists knew they could bring all of their lives before God, they knew they had a relationship with God which was strong enough to bear these hard things being said, they knew God could handle their hurt, ultimately they knew God was faithful and all about steadfast love. We need to have this vocabulary in these times. Think for a moment about that New Testament reading we had earlier… think of Jesus, and he hangs on that cross, and he is there taking into his very self, absorbing into his own body, the brokenness and the sin of the world.

And what does he say… ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ More to the point, he quotes from a psalm… the opening words of Psalm 22… you want permission to pray these psalms of lament, look no further, here are psalms of lament on the very lips of Jesus.

So hear this permission… but also please hear something else which I think we need to recognise as we come to the end of our reflections on Psalm 44, and it’s to do with what we read in the very last verse, in fact it’s to do with the last very words:

**Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love.**

**Psalms 44:26**

‘Your unfailing love.’ That’s what we read in the NIV, other versions speak of ‘steadfast love,’ or ‘unfailing love,’ different ways of translating what in the Hebrew is the word ‘*hesed*.’

And I find it so striking, so helpful, so important that, as we get to the end of the psalm, when all is said and done, when everything has been put ‘out there’ and on the table, when all the bewilderment and grief and sense of loss is named, still the final words are a plea to God to come to the rescue, and a plea which is made on the basis of his steadfast love.

And for me this speaks so evocatively, so beautifully of something else we have to take from a reading of this psalm… that it is ok to lament and grieve and take our anger and disappointment to God, but at some point we need to be able to move on from that place. And here at the end of this psalm is Israel seeking to do this and counting on God’s love, counting on God’s faithfulness, counting to God to make a difference. Have you ever been in that place, where you can’t understand why God has allowed something has happen but still you go back to him, because where else are you going to go?

And you go back to him because you know that, for all that has happened, still God is the one who can change things… still God is the one who can make a way, and lift you from the pit and put you feet on solid ground, still God can restore your fortunes.

So can I encourage you to pray like this psalmist… to pray honestly, to pray openly, to take it all to God, and to keep believing, keep praying, keep looking to him.