

Laughter and tears

Bible readings: Psalm 22 and Psalm 126 (and a bit of Hebrews: ch.13 vv.5-6)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream.

*The was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with songs of joy.
Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.*

An odd name for a beauty spot, I always thought. The Valley of Desolation is on the River Wharfe in Yorkshire, just above Bolton Abbey (if I remember rightly). No sign today of the terrible storm that ripped through it some 200 years ago, leaving a scene of utter desolation. Now it's serene and beautiful, a place for the healing of the soul.

Psalm 126 is one of those moments when the clouds part and the pilgrims get a glimpse of the summit, bathed in glorious sunshine. A moment of incredulous joy, when the tears turn to laughter and you realize with a lift of the heart that there is a future out there, there will be a time when this is all over. We need those moments to keep us going. Being a pilgrim means walking in the light of promise, "bearing the seed" of God's future harvest. Like the "cloud of witnesses" of Hebrews 11, we are "marching to Zion", citizens of the heavenly city whose builder and maker is God (Heb 13.14).

But first comes the dark night of the soul, the valley of desolation. Psalm 22 is a hard one to read — almost unbearable in its pathos. It reminds us that next week is Holy Week, when we seek to follow Jesus on the road to the Cross. In normal times we would hear the choir sing this psalm on Thursday night during the stripping of the altars, preparing us for the desolation of Good Friday and Jesus' cry of dereliction from the Cross:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from my salvation, from the words of my distress?
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer:
And by night also, but I find no rest.
Be not far from me, for trouble is near,
And there is none to help. (Psalm 22.1-2, 11)*

This psalm (like all the psalms of lament) has a particular resonance in these days of coronavirus. As the epidemic moves towards its peak, it reminds us of Jesus' solidarity with the victims of the virus — with the sick, with the bereaved, with the distressed. With those who are over-worked, and with those who have lost their jobs. He shared those feelings of anxiety and helplessness, of not knowing who to turn to — and perhaps our feelings of simply being overwhelmed at times by the news. Crying out to God is the right and proper response from the valley of desolation.

“Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy”. Yes, “joy cometh in the morning” — but the tears are real too, and God is with us in both. He is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever.”

Some words from Hebrews to send us on our way today:

*Be content with what you have; for he has said,
“I will never leave you for forsake you.”
So we can say with confidence,
“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”
Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever.
Hebrews 13.5-6, 8.*

God bless, Loveday