

When Hell Breaks Loose (August 2014)

Psalm 10, Isaiah 42 v 1-4/53 v 5-6 , Revelation 2 v 8-11

There is a raw intensity in the words of Psalm 10. For the writer, it seems like Hell has broken loose around him and Heaven doesn't seem to care! Wicked people are ruthlessly brutalising their neighbours. Innocent civilians are being driven from their homes and businesses, kidnapped, beaten, raped, even whole families murdered.

This has gone way beyond choosing diplomatic words and tactful phrases. This man believes that God is good and all-powerful but the situation around him on earth is so unjust, so cruel, so intolerable he cries out in pain and frustration this prayer. He holds nothing back but passionately pleads for God to help:

-Why, O Lord do you seem to be standing back? Why do you seem to be unavailable for comment today? Don't you see these vulnerable minorities? Some of them are Your followers! Many of them are helpless women and children. Most of them are victims caught up in a conflict which is not of their making. Come on Lord! Do something! Do not forget the helpless! *Lord* – don't abandon us!

It could be hard to decide which feels worse – that human beings are at times unspeakably wicked and cruel, or that the God in Heaven to Whom we pray, in Whom we trust, seems far removed and unconcerned!

This Psalm teaches us that it is ok to be honest and frank with God. Reverent of course, but 100% ourselves. We believe God is in control, but from our perspective this situation seems ridiculously unfair, and so painful! We pour out our feelings without fear or embarrassment.

Note a person of faith does not turn away from God in a crisis but turns to Him with deeper earnestness than before. And as we turn to God and His Word the Bible we find a number of things to instruct and comfort us.

First, we find it's nothing new, this terrible violence and injustice. It was obviously happening in David's day 1000BC. More, it's been happening since the Fall in Genesis 3. In the very next chapter Genesis 4 Cain lets selfish jealousy turn to malice and violence, murdering his brother Abel, and the rest of the children of Adam have been at it ever since, resenting, slaying, abusing one another in a host of different ways. If not in physical violence at times, then with our words and attitudes towards one another. And if anything it may get worse, not better before our Lord returns in glory to judge the living and the dead!

Jesus has told His Church what to expect in the Gospels. As the Good News of God's grace and salvation spreads globally, as His witnesses fulfil His Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, the Devil spitefully stirs up opposition, using one violent, oppressive system after another.

The New Testament book of Revelation is often victim to extreme or fanciful interpretations, therefore many Christians neglect it which is a pity, for it was written towards the end of the 1st century AD to encourage the Church of Christ as it faced intense persecution. Let's not be too taken up with the 'villains' who are really the losers, or the colourful imagery but let's grasp this central message – Jesus is with us in our trials and the end of all things is in His loving hands!

Jesus speaks to the little fellowship in Smyrna and tells them plainly they are going to face a period of painful challenge. The Roman Imperial religion was strong there. Their bishop Polycarp would be martyred about 50 years after this. Don't be surprised, says Jesus, stay faithful.

Think about it, it's *Jesus* Who is speaking. Jesus, Who, though Son of God, eternal co-Creator of the world, became part of it, took on flesh, suffered, bled and was Himself brutally murdered. But now He is risen and appears in the early chapters of Revelation in dazzling heavenly splendour with universal authority. He is the royal Lion of Judah, the Lamb Who was slain but is alive, victorious forevermore. He alone is the Champion worthy to open the scroll of human history and bring about its climax.

*And* He is pictured standing among the lampstands of his Church. He is with us! Not far away like it feels to the Psalm writer. Our crucified, risen Lord is with us to comfort and strengthen us in our trials. He puts a limit on the Devil – he knows his time is short. Christ urges us to remain faithful to Him and He promises the reward of a crown of life for all eternity!

This is wonderful and reassuring, but things still hurt deeply in the short-term! And being human we may be tempted to turn to bitterness and vindictiveness. It's so easy in times of trouble and violent crisis for the line between justice and revenge to become blurred!

In such times as these, Christians need to pray more than ever not just for comfort and protection but for the guidance and courage of the One Who was pierced and crushed for our sakes and on the very cross still prayed "Father, forgive" for his executioners.

May He give us a heart and mind like His that will strive always to do what is right and good and kind and merciful even when others around us are turning to bitterness and evil!

A man once admitted very honestly to Jesus, "I do believe, please help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9 v 24) He was no atheist or cynic. He was a devout man who wanted to believe. But his life had been difficult. He had some honest doubts and questions. Nevertheless he came to Jesus and asked for help. The encouraging thing is that while Jesus always urged people to have faith and on occasions gently chided His disciples for lack of it, He still welcomed this man and kindly helped him and his family.

God is compassionate and gracious and does not condemn us for the quality of our faith. In truth our faith is sometimes like a fragile reed swaying in the wind or a smouldering wick under threat of being extinguished. The Bible urges us to put our faith, however weak and shaky, in the all-sufficient Saviour. As an old hymn puts it – we are weak but He is strong!

When our trust is in Christ, Who was 'pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities' then the punishment He endured on the cross brings us forgiveness and peace with God, by His wounds we experience healing in our souls and are made new, and we are promised the eternal comfort of Heaven.

Because Jesus not only died but rose again His followers are assured that death is not the end for us but a new beginning. We shall be granted to rise also. God our Father will on that day wipe every tear from our eyes and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.