

Craving God

A sermon on Psalm 63:1-8 & Isaiah 55:1-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 March 2022

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Christian spirituality is full of yearning and hungering and reaching for a God who can never quite be satisfyingly grasped.

Sermon

I don't very often preach on the Psalms, but I want to do so tonight.

I'm conscious though that our readings from the Gospels and the New Testament raised some tough questions and offered somewhat contradictory answers about how we can or can't see God's hand in human suffering. I'm aware that some of you might have been struck by those questions and be wanting to grapple with them and I don't want to entirely let you down. The trouble with passages like those two is that the issues are so meaty that it is tempting to preach on them every time they come up. Tonight I'm going to take a completely different tack, but in the website version of this sermon, you'll find [a link to one on the gospel reading from three years ago](#) for those of you who want to chew on those issues at home.

So now, let's reflect on Psalm 63. Fortunately, not many of us have ever had the experience of being lost in the hot desert and running out of water, but most of us have a sense of what it would be like. The feeling of thirst overtaking every inch of your body, of your throat and tongue and lips beginning to dry out and the knowledge that unless you find water very soon, you're going to die a painful and despairing death.

When I wrote the first draft of the prayer of invocation we are using during Lent, with its images of parched burnt land yearning for rain, and the ominous signs of immanent death; I shared it with some other liturgists around the world, asking for their feedback, but I told them that I thought the imagery was too Australian to be much use elsewhere.

One of them wrote back saying that he thought it described the geography of the human soul more than the geography of any particular place and people anywhere would relate to it. I'm especially hoping that that's true this year, because otherwise those Lenten prayers seem totally out of touch in a year when this late summer period has brought not drought and fires, but so much rain that we've had devastating floods. But if my friend is right, the parched desert imagery still describes the geography of our souls. Somewhere inside, we all know those feelings, even if we've never physically been there.

The writer of Psalm 63 begins with these same feelings:

“God, my God, you I crave;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body aches for you
like a dry and weary land.”

Our reading from Isaiah also started with similar feelings:

“Are you thirsty – come to the waters!

Are you hungry – come and eat!”

The Isaiah reading, at first glance, seems to be offering a simple answer: If you’re thirsty, come to the water. It’s not that simple though is it, and I think if you read Isaiah carefully you can see that he knew it too.

It is not uncommon for people to try to present Christian faith as if it were like that though – just a simple answer to your deepest hungers and hopes: are you thirsty, come to the water and Jesus will give you complete and lasting satisfaction. But if we are honest about it, it’s not really like that, is it? The reality is that our life of faith is mostly lived out somewhere in between the two halves of that statement; somewhere between acknowledging our thirst and drinking our fill.

Psalms 63 reflects this well, because it offers a great deal of hope – speaking of God’s love being better than life and being like a rich banquet for the soul, and God’s wings being a place of warmth and safety – but at the same time those opening words continue to hang over the whole psalm:

“God, my God, you I crave;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body aches for you
like a dry and weary land.”

Our experience of God’s love might be the best thing in life, it might be better than life itself, but it is never so complete and tangible that it utterly satisfies us. It always leaves us crying for more. It always leaves us still thirsty, still reaching out for something so elusive that we can never quite get a grip on it.

Somehow our experience of God’s love is always part oasis and part mirage. We get enough of a taste of God to prevent our throats from cracking and to keep up our strength to keep trekking through the wilderness in search of the life-giving waters that will satisfy us for eternity; but at the same time the experience of intimate communion with God seems to keep evaporating in front of us and reappearing as a shimmering haze on the outer edge of our consciousness.

This is something Christians often don’t talk about, perhaps because they feel guilty about it. I think we are often afraid to admit to just how much our yearning for God goes unsatisfied and how much our quest for the truth about God keeps getting stranded in indecipherable mystery. I think we are often afraid to admit it because we think we’re supposed to feel differently. We think that a personal relationship with Jesus should be as tangible as a relationship with anyone else. We are worried that our experience is that of a spiritual cripple who can’t do what everyone else can do. Am I right?

Well, if we were to read the whole Bible on this question, we’d find that this Psalm is no isolated instance. In fact, we’d find that the Bible is full of stories and images in which our experience finds voice. And if we were to read the writings of the heroes of the faith down through the centuries since the Bible was closed, we’d find the same again. Saint after saint witnesses to the experience of yearning for God, of hungering and thirsting for God, of reaching and grasping for God, and never quite finding an experience of God that makes the

hunger go away. You will read of countless experiences in which the presence of God is discerned and celebrated, but the thirst is still there, the craving for something more real, more definite, more tangible continues to gnaw at us. We are in good company.

There is a parallel to this reality in our experience of online worship here in the Cyber Chapel. We have a genuine need for connection with one another, and our way of gathering here meets a lot of that need, and sometimes it feels almost as though we were gathered in the same room. But then at the click of a button, or a drop-out of the internet signal, the feelings of being together evaporate in an instant and we find ourselves alone again.

Our experience of God is like that too, and my friends, this is the reality we live with. This is where true Christian faith is lived out. This is the road Jesus walked, all the way to the cross. When he hung there and screamed, “God, why have you abandoned me,” wasn’t he experiencing a craving for God that could find no adequate answer?

If God could have been right there, close and definite and undoubtable, then perhaps the agony of the cross would have been bearable. Perhaps he hoped that in that moment of ultimate submission to the will of God, he would find the perfect experience of God as the cool waters that quench our deepest thirst. But it’s not like that – not even for Jesus. We have to live in the in-between, in the place where we know that this craving can only be satisfied in God, but where God is still beyond what we can grasp or comprehend.

That’s why we call it living by faith. If God was so easily experienced that we could never doubt, faith would be a meaningless concept. Faith is putting our trust in something we can’t see and can’t even quite comprehend; something that dances in the haze at the edge of our consciousness and eludes our grasping hands and minds. That’s why faith continues to be a journey, and why the shadow of the cross always hangs over that journey. We keep journeying because we know we still haven’t found what we’re looking for.

But it’s also an exhilarating journey, because we keep catching glimpses of this elusive God for whom we hunger, and hearing whispers of promise of what is yet to come.

As the Psalmist says, we come to the place of worship, because there in worship we glimpse visions of God’s strength and glory. We lie awake at night, and treasure each thought of the God who crossed our path during the day, leaving tantalising footprints in the desert sand. We suddenly become aware that our trust has been rewarded because we have survived something that we could only have survived under the shelter of God’s wing, but no sooner have we realised it, than we find ourselves alone again, yearning for that place of warmth and comfort.

We worship with our hands reaching out for a God beyond our reach, and our voices crying the name of a God whose name is always a mystery to us. And just like they say ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’, so our continued yearning and desiring and thirsting fuels a fire of love within us that burns in our bones and which we know will find its home and its resting place in God. The yearning itself is the promise of God, and as each fleeting encounter with the God who is both oasis and mirage nourishes us for the journey ahead and evaporates before us leading us on still further, so the knowledge grows in us, that the God who is the goal of all our longing will sit us down to feast at the banqueting table of life. But until then we need bread for the journey...