Psalm 73

*1. Truly, God is loving to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.*

*2. Nevertheless, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.*

*3. For I was envious of the proud; I saw the wicked in such prosperity;*

*4. For they suffer no pains and their bodies are sleek and sound.*

*5. They come to no misfortune like other folk; nor are they plagued as others are;*

*6. Therefore pride is their necklace and violence wraps them like a cloak.*

*7. Their iniquity comes from within; the conceits of their hearts overflow.*

*8. They scoff, they speak only of evil; they talk of oppression from on high.*

*9. They set their mouths against the heavens,*

 *and their tongue ranges round the earth.*

*10. And so the people turn to them and find in them no fault.*

*11. They say, ‘How should God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’*

*12. Behold, these are the wicked; ever at ease, they increase their wealth.*

*13. Is it in vain that I cleansed my heart and washed my hands in innocence?*

*14. All day long have I been stricken and chastened every morning.*

*15. If I had said, ‘I will speak as they do,’*

 *I should have betrayed the generation of your children.*

*16. Then thought I to understand this, but it was too hard for me,*

*17. Until I entered the sanctuary of God and understood the end of the wicked.*

*18. How you set them in slippery places; you cast them down to destruction.*

*19. How suddenly do they come to destruction, perish and come to a fearful end!*

*20. As with a dream when one awakes,*

 *so, Lord, when you arise you will despise their image.*

*21. When my heart became embittered and I was pierced to the quick,*

*22. I was but foolish and ignorant; I was like a brute beast in your presence.*

*23. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*

*24. You will guide me with your counsel and afterwards receive me with glory.*

*25. Whom have I in heaven but you?*

 *And there is nothing upon earth that I desire in comparison with you.*

*26. Though my flesh and my heart fail me,*

 *God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.*

*27. Truly, those who forsake you will perish;*

 *you will put to silence the faithless who betray you.*

*28. But it is good for me to draw near to God,*

 *in the Lord God have I made my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.*

Refrain

God is loving

to those who are pure in heart.

Psalm 73 is a wisdom psalm, which depicts the journey from doubt to faith. The psalmist is a priest or a leader of the religious community. He had slipped from the doctrine that loyalty to God means prosperity. (vv.1,2, ‘Truly God is loving to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Nevertheless, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.’). He saw that arrogance and brutality paid dividends and ended up envying the prosperity of the wicked. (v.3, ‘For I was envious of the proud; I saw the wicked in such prosperity.’)

 In vv. 4-14, the situation, which led to his doubts, is described. His oppressors seem to be free from pain and trouble (v.5, ‘They come to no misfortune like other folk.’), and their pride and violence have become badges of distinction. (v.6, ‘Therefore pride is their necklace and violence wraps them like a cloak.’) Do we see this these days in the gangs of youths in some cities?

 Instead of avoiding them, people seem to do them honour. (v.10 ‘And so the people turn to them and find in them no fault.’) They insult God. (v.11, ‘They say, “How should God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”)

They become fatter and more self-satisfied. (v.12, ‘Behold, these are the wicked; ever at ease, they increase their wealth.’). The psalmist has been loyal, but it doesn’t seem to have got him anywhere! (v.13, ‘Is it in vain that I cleansed my heart and washed my hands in innocence?’) People sometimes say, ’Why should this (illness or misfortune) happen to a good person like that, and others get away with it?’

###  The psalmist thought that he would announce this to the congregation, but that wouldn’t do any good, and it would be harmful to the congregation. (v.15, ‘If I had said, “I will speak as they do”, I should have betrayed the generation of your children.’) He thought a lot about it, but couldn’t understand it all. In the end, he went into the temple, prayed to God and found the answer to his problem. (vv.16,17, ‘Then I thought to understand this, but it was too hard for me, until I entered the sanctuary of God and understood the end of the wicked,’)

 In the last section (vv.18-28), the psalmist realises that wealth alone is not a stable foundation for life. We all encounter problems, for example, illness, bereavement, whatever our financial status. The psalmist sees that the wicked will disappear and be forgotten, like a dream. (v.20).

 So, he has learnt that material prosperity is less important than we tend to think it is, and he sees himself as having behaved in his envy of the wicked like a beast, concerned only for its own comfort. He realises that it is God, who must be at the centre, rather than possessions, and that we are richer than anyone else when we have fellowship with God, because this is permanent. God guides our life and this lasts beyond death, where God’s glory still rules. (vv.23,24, ‘Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel and afterwards receive me with glory.’)

 This is the case for us, too. The way of God is a way of love, service, compassion for other people, a way of justice and peace. We say at the Peace at the Eucharist, ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. If we live in the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit.’ These are eternal values, and we are promised eternal life, if we remain faithful. That is what the psalmist understood in the end after his struggle, and we have to cling to that hope, too. After all, riches and possessions do not last for ever.

Prayer

Keep, O Lord, your Church,

with your perpetual mercy,

and, because without you our human frailty cannot but fall,

keep us ever by your help from all things hurtful,

and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(Post Communion Collect, Trinity 15)

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