

'How Long O Lord how long?'

Read: Psalm 13

The Scriptures that Jesus knew were the Jewish Scriptures of the prophets and the psalms. This session's title comes from one of the 150 psalms that made up a kind of hymn book for worship in the Temple. Each psalm is a song that helped all those who heard it or sang it themselves to tell the story of God's people: their trials and battles, their triumphs and their failures. Psalm 13 begins with the phrase '*How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*'

And the author knew what he was talking about. King David, said to be the writer of this psalm, led what could be called a colourful life, full of family intrigue, battles against his rivals, a rather chaotic private life and - the greatest tragedy of his life - the violent death of his son Absalom. This then is a cry born of life experience, a cry of dereliction, a sense that God is hiding from him - that he can't see where God is in his life. This is the kind of thing thought about and prayed about by people all over the world of every faith and language.

The psalms themselves are a fantastic source of honest, sometimes bracing, challenging cries to God. They can be shocking: challenging

God profoundly about personal circumstances or blaming God, or desperately asking God to destroy the people who are 'enemies'. And the cry that we are considering this session: *How long O Lord?* is one that has been powerful for generations of people stuck in a situation they don't want or can't tolerate.

'How long?' is a question alive today in refugee camps around the world, in housing estates overrun by gangs, in villages waiting for rain, and in the quiet despair of domestic abuse.

Waiting for things to change. Waiting for life to get better. Waiting for circumstances to improve - for the boss to resign or the child to come back or the night to fall. Waiting takes many forms, both profound and mundane. We all do it, mostly we try to reduce it, and some of us even say we hate it. Waiting is something that often evokes emotion in us, frustration or fury in equal measure.

"Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can - seldom found in woman, and never in a man."

Attributed to philosopher John Dewey

Waiting and status

In our society, people who wait are usually people who are poor. Eliminating waiting is a sign of status or wealth.

Instead of waiting for the bus home, he orders a car to be waiting for him after the meeting. Instead of waiting for a slot to come up with the GP, she sees a doctor within 24 hours under her private insurance. The one who waits is lower status than the one who doesn't have to.

This reveals a fundamental reflection about time in a modern mechanised and complex society. For systems to work well, there often needs to be a physical space where those in the system can wait. It keeps things running on time; it keeps things efficient. A highly skilled person like a doctor needs to be made the most of, and so her day is parcelled up into 10-minute appointments. So as not to waste her time, there is a place for people to wait to see her. She doesn't wait. But they do. It is a sign that her time is more highly valued by society. And we move between these roles all the time. That same GP could visit her bank at lunchtime, and have to stand in line until a cashier is free.

By the same token, keeping someone waiting is often used as a way to dominate or intimidate. It's a tool used sometimes to do just that because it demands a different level of knowledge from both parties. The one who waits doesn't have

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

Barack Obama

any idea (usually) how long this is going to last. The one who keeps the other waiting is in control, not only of the agenda and order of things, but seemingly of time itself. It can change the dynamic of a meeting.

Time waits for no one

There are some more fundamental ways in which we all wait. For a flower to bloom; for a baby to arrive; for a loved one to die.

But as the 12th century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer noted in the Clerk's Tale from the famous Canterbury Tales: 'For though we sleep, or wake or roam, or ride, time flies and waits for no one'. In other words, whether we're active or not, busy or still, time will continue to pass. It waits for no one.

In W H Vanstone's famous book *The Stature of Waiting*, waiting is one of the key aspects attributed to Jesus's life and ministry precisely because it is a low status activity. Christian waiting is a challenge to a world that says the only valuable life is a productive life. Waiting in an attentive way, in an alert way, will mean that you become more aware of the world and its rhythms; you