

work in the lives of each one of us, if we are open to his grace?

Session 3 – The Psalms

[13]

The Psalms: 150 ballads, which run the gamut of life and death, hope and despair, celebrating a God as close as touch and yet at the same time so far away you may wonder if he existed at all. In Jesus Christ Superstar Jesus, asking his Heavenly Father if there is a way out of his looming death, uses the words of a psalm in this form: 'I only want to say, if there is a way, take this cup away from me, I don't want to taste its poison.' I asked our contributors whether God is close enough to touch them - or so far away as to be virtually non-existent. Carmody Grey and then Catherine Fox.

CG: Both. God is always both: infinitely near and infinitely distant. We easily get into the way of thinking that God is like other objects in the world. Like a sort of thing - a very special thing - but fundamentally a thing like other things. And sometimes I'm experiencing the sunlight on a lovely day, or the space inside a church, or the space inside my room, or I'm experiencing a particular person and so on - and that can experience God a bit like that. That God suddenly, as an object, comes into our sphere of perception, and then we experience God. And actually, of course, God isn't like that at all. God isn't something in fact that we can experience, in the sense that God is not an object. God is, shall we say, present to us in all objects,

speaking to us through everything that happens at every moment at all times. God is not a separate thing that sometimes comes near and retreats, even though we do, of course, sometimes experience it like that.

CF: I think again I've been very lucky that my overriding experience is of the closeness of God. -And in particular, when things are hard, it seems to me that, when you're going through the valley of the shadow of death, in whatever way, those are the moments when the presence of the shepherd feels most tangible. And I think we're given every encouragement to ransack the Psalms to find a voice for those moments when God feels absent.

Steve Chalke quoted Mother Teresa's experience, or otherwise, of God.

SC: Teresa says, that having heard God so clearly saying to her, "Go to the streets", from almost the moment she arrived, the sense of God's presence utterly deserted her. And all of these letters tell that story. Now they're written over 40 or so years, and in that whole time she never feels God's presence, except once, I think: a glimpse in 1963 or 7, or something. She just writes about how this sense of faith came back - and then disappeared and deserted her. And she cries out, "Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?" Now the incredible thing is, that when she died, her order wanted these letters to be destroyed, because they thought they spoke of her lack of faith. But the Vatican ordered them to be saved and kept. And now they're published. And of course, a brilliant move by the Vatican, because what

they depict is what real faithfulness, faith in the New Testament sense of faithfulness, I pledge to serve you from this day on. Real faith comes through. Mother Teresa didn't have faith as a feeling; she didn't have faith as a glow; she didn't have a faith as this warm understanding that God was always there. She had *faithfulness*, which she understood as dependent on God's faithfulness to her. God was faithful to her, whether she could feel his presence or not. And *she* was going to be faithful. And whether I feel God's there, or I don't feel God's there, I have committed to be faithful to him because I know, first and foremost, I am rescued by the faithfulness of Jesus. I bask in that. It's not about what I do, achieve, think - or anything. But in response to being 'in' - included - I give my life.

[14] Psalm 137.9 ends with the words, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." *Where is God's grace for those monsters who do throw children against rocks? Carmody first and then Catherine, who sees this verse as encouragement not to retaliate.*

CG: My mother used to work as a probation officer. And she's a woman of quite breathtaking and unlimited capacity to love. And she found herself working, at one point, with a man, who seemed to her - and I've never heard her say this before or since - who seemed to her, genuinely evil - in himself, having become evil. And she really struggled with this, and it was a trial and a burden to know how to respond to this man. And she found herself one day at a church service celebrated by the then

Orthodox Bishop Metropolitan Anthony Bloom. And she approached him afterwards and said about this situation, and asked Bishop Bloom what she should do. And her description of that conversation is one of the sort of guiding stories of my life. Bishop Bloom said to her, "You simply have to love him." And my mother, who is a person I've never known to run out of love, said how incredibly hard that was to hear. That the only response she could make to evil was love. And the really awkward and uncomfortable thing about Christian faith is that God really doesn't think that anybody is beyond reach. And therefore Christians can't think that either. And that's a very awkward thing, because with all the love in the world, there are people in this world that we want to put beyond the pale, and we want to turn our backs on, and cast into the outer darkness. But those are the people that God comes to save, and those are the people to whom God gives himself. That's not to say for a moment that those people don't continually, ongoingly, have the freedom to walk away from that. But it's their freedom - it's not God's cutting off of those people. There is a mystery of evil in the world. And there are people who dash children against rocks. And other unthinkable things. But, as God says, his will is to save, not to condemn, and he comes for the sinners and not for the righteous. And the Christian responsibility is always and only to love.

CF: I think the context has some bearing on this - not to excuse that kind of atrocity, but to help us