

**THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**  
**DIOCESAN SYNOD**  
**12 JUNE 2021**

An important part of today's agenda is a discussion about how we can 'emerge hopefully' from the past year after three lockdowns. When I was discussing this with my colleagues, it became clear that we needed to set our discussion in the framework of eternal truths of the Gospel. So I want to use my Presidential Address to set out the theological foundations for this item and to do that I am going to use one of the very familiar psalms which is set in the lectionary for today.

The Book of Psalms is the most ancient hymnbook of the church and contains the prayers of believers which have stood the test of time. So let's spend a few minutes pondering Psalm 46:

- <sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.
- <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*
- <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- <sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*
- <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the LORD;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.'
- <sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

The psalm is in three sections, verses 1-3, 4-7 and 8-11

All Christians experience those times when we are faced with obstacles or seemingly overwhelming problems. Maybe it's something in our personal lives such as an illness; maybe we are beset with envy, greed or fear and we can't overcome it; or maybe it's that we give in to temptation and convince ourselves that we are so unworthy of God that we are beyond his love.

Or perhaps the obstacle is something external, such as living through a time of war or economic depression or being made redundant or, as in our case, the Covid pandemic.

When faced with such problems we have a choice. We can either give into hopelessness and say: "I can't do anything for God until I can remove this problem or resolve it". In such instances it's tempting to allow the problem to define us and we may even give up.

Alternatively, we can say: "This problem is the raw material which God can use and it can become the means through which I can grow and thrive and flourish". When we take this latter course, it can transform the way we react to our circumstances. Instead of being bowed down by the problem, we approach it in the light of God's love. The problem can become the means of spiritual growth.

Having spoken with many people over these past months, including some to whom I give spiritual direction, I know that the last year has presented us with that same choice.

For some, it's been difficult because the external supports have been removed. We've not been able to gather to worship and to have fellowship as we used to. We've not been able to sing together, which means our worship has felt impoverished. It's been easy to grit our teeth and think "Let's hold on until we get through this and then we can get back to normal".

For others, the lockdowns have opened up new opportunities and new insights. St John Chrysostom once famously said: "Since Christ has now come and purified the whole world, every place has become an oratory" – a place for prayer and worship.

Of course, the norm is for us to gather together, which is why God has given us each other, the church. But, as Christians have found in every generation, in every nation, in every circumstance, when we cannot meet with others, God does not abandon us. We can still meet with God alone, in our bubble, or online.

I remember as a young Christian reading the autobiography of Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralysed after diving into shallow water and became a quadriplegic. She wrote with searing honesty of her years of rehabilitation when she was angry, suicidal and full of doubt about God's love for her, as she had little physical movement and was confined to a wheelchair. She began to paint with a brush between her teeth and sold her paintings. In the midst of all the pain and grief her faith gradually grew. She began to write of her experiences and today has published around forty books and campaigns for people with disabilities.

As today's psalm assures us, the same God is with us whatever events hit us. Our true and only security comes from God alone:

- <sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.
- <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

Some years ago, I was in Delhi when an earthquake hit. I was in my hotel and for a few moments couldn't work out what was happening, as the entire building began to sway. It felt as if there was nothing to hold onto. It was a disorientating and frightening experience.

God alone is the one who can offer us refuge when everything around us that had seemed so secure and stable is falling apart. What the psalmist assures us is that, even if the mountains and earth – the very things that seem most stable – move and shake, it's at this point that God is 'a very present help in trouble'. He is the one in whom we can find security.

In verses 4-6 the psalmist turns from earthquakes to the experience of being a city under siege. Here the waters don't 'roar and foam' but flow steadily and gently – they are a 'life-giving river' - despite the warfare that is raging around the great walls surrounding the city of Jerusalem:

- <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- <sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

The phrase 'God will help it when the morning dawns' is a direct reference back to Exodus 14.27 when God turned back the Red Sea to allow his persecuted people to escape the wrath of the Egyptian warriors and enter into the promised land.

Despite the external threats the psalmist assures us that 'The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge'.

Finally, the psalmist turns to the future in verses 8 - 11:

- <sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the LORD;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.'

<sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

The present victories are just a foretaste of what is to come. This predicts the powerful words of St John in the final book of the bible when in his vision he tells us:

<sup>3</sup>'See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.'

So God now challenges his people: "Be still, and know that I am God!"

The command is to stop fighting, stop worrying, stop niggling away and instead enter into the inner stillness where God is to be found. The command echoes the words of Jesus much later, when he is caught up in a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee and commands the raging waters: "Peace! Be still".

One final point about this psalm. You may have noticed the word *selah* which occurs three times. It's a word that's found 74 times in the Hebrew Bible, in the psalms and in the prophet Habakkuk. We are not absolutely sure what it means but the consensus is that it it's a command to pause, to reflect and to take in the truth we've just heard and to affirm it. It's a cross between 'stop and listen' and 'Amen' – "Yes, that's what I believe and know to be true".

The psalmist tells us we can scan these words hurriedly and not enter into their meaning and reality. However, when we pause, reflect and allow these truths to take hold of our minds, our hearts and our emotions, then we will begin to view the world with God's eyes and allow his presence and his power to work in and through us.

It's this deep sense of God's presence with us, whatever befalls us, that will enable us to 'emerge hopefully' as we seek to *Live God's Love*, with 'generosity and joy, imagination and courage'.

+Alan St Albans

June 2021