

Collins Street Baptist Church
February 13, 2011
10.30am & 5.00pm

When Disappointment Sets In Psalm 121

Introduction

Today we continue our series of reflections on the question, 'So what?' For all the things we profess to believe as Christians, what difference does our faith make when life falls apart? In times of disaster, loss, disappointment and heartache, how does faith speak into the pain and struggle of our lives?

These four Sundays I have chosen to draw on the Psalms from the Old Testament. At first glance, this might seem an odd choice. After all, the Psalms seem to be full of the most audacious claims about the majesty, the boundless love and the omnipotence of God. Frankly, this can all sound so hollow in times of struggle. The truth is, in the valley of shadows God can feel more absent than present, more callous than caring, more distant than supportive.

So why the Psalms? Because in reality, the psalms are as much cries of lament as they are hymns of praise. Look more closely at the psalms and what you find are confronting and honest testaments to the painful experiences of life and all the questions they raise for an all-powerful and all-knowing God. The more I read them and the more I understand the stories that lie behind them, the more encouragement I find from them.

Before we begin today with Psalm 121, let's take a moment to be silent before God, to remind ourselves that whenever we read and reflect upon the words of Holy Scripture, it is likely that God will speak directly to us.

When disappointment sets in

I begin with a confession: this business of church leadership has never come easily to me. I am not a natural leader. I am not a charismatic figure naturally inspiring others for battle. I have often longed to be. In my early days of ministry I aspired to it. I took on my first pastoral appointment with great energy and hope, a new church plant in Cranbourne, an outer suburb of Melbourne. At the time Cranbourne was on the edge of a boom in population. Housing was cheap and the land endless. I arrived with my bible under my arm and a commission to establish a new and thriving congregation. Despite my resolve and bucket loads of sincerity, I very quickly came to the end of my resources. To be honest, not much thriving happened. While the church certainly moved gently along with a small community of people, it was a constant struggle. We hit roadblock after roadblock. Nothing came easily.

At the time I was a student at seminary alongside others preparing for the Baptist ministry. In the midst of this despair over my leadership, I sat in the chapel and listened to a lecture on church growth. The lecturer made a very legitimate critique of church growth strategies, suggesting that the growth of our churches had far more to do with demographics than with the movement of God's Spirit. His thesis was that churches grow naturally where the population is thriving. And equally they struggle in places of stagnation. In the midst of his spirited presentation, he said, 'Take a place like Cranbourne. You could do nothing but sit on your hands out there and the church would grow!'

I remember the long drive home that day, the tears and the resentment ... and the feeling of failure. The disappointment was overwhelming: disappointment in the church; disappointment in God; but more than anything, profound disappointment in myself. It felt as though a black cloud descended, and I began to question seriously if this whole business of pastoral ministry was just a mistake.

At one time or another, disappointment sets in for all of us. It can hit us with the force of truck, stopping us unexpectedly and rudely along the way, or it can descend slowly like a dark blanket of despair, hovering over us for long periods of time. Perhaps it hits us when we fail to get into the course of our dreams, when the person we love does not love us in return, or when our sixteenth job application goes nowhere. Perhaps it hovers over us as we live with an intractable situation with our children, as we look back over our lives and wonder why things never worked out the way we had imagined. The question is, what difference does faith make when disappointment sets in? What does our Christian faith have to offer when we feel nothing but failure, regret or dismay?

At first glance, Psalm 121 reads more like a motivational poster than something of real help: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where does my help come? It comes from the Lord.' Yeah, whatever. In truth, it takes a little more digging to understand the real worth of this psalm.

Psalm 121 is what's called a psalm of ascent, or alternately, a psalm of pilgrimage. It is one of 30 such psalms written for the people of God, words that they would recite together as they ascended to the temple for worship or made pilgrimage from one place to another. It is most likely that this psalm was written for the people who, after decades of exile in Babylon, were returning to Jerusalem—ascending to the city of God. They had not been there for sixty years; most of them had never seen the place before. They had lived with decades of disappointment: disappointment in God and disappointment in themselves. Their entire story as a nation was a story of disappointment and regret. And now, as they trudged their way back into the unknown, that same disappointment hovered over them. In fact, it had hovered for so long they were now more naturally fearful than excited, more cynical than hopeful. They were no longer even sure that this homeward journey was what they wanted.

'I lift my eyes to the hills,' the psalm begins. The journey back to Jerusalem was through dangerous territory. It was by no means a straightforward route. The mountainous regions through which they travelled were fraught with threat and danger. The hills or mountains were associated as much with wild animals, bandits and waiting armies as they were with the presence of the Divine. These words are not so much about looking to the hills for deliverance or divine intervention. Rather it's 'look to the hills—face your fears, face your disappointment, face your anxiety and then know who it is that is watching over you as your travel through them; the one who made the heavens and the earth; the one who is never taken by surprise.'

The psalm goes on to describe God as protector, keeper, and the one who leads his people into a new place. While we don't have the time or space today to do this psalm justice, let me simply tell what difference my faith has made in this God of Psalm 121.

The first thing is this: I have been kept. The truth is, I will never be the pastoral leader that I had envisioned in my youth. And, to be honest, the disappointment still hovers from time to time. I look at others with their shiny extraverted selves and their seemingly endless ability to influence and inspire, and I am reminded of what I lack. But I am still here. What I have found in God is not always the transformation that I had hoped for, but a God who has kept me, a God who has carried me, a God who has sustained me, shaded me, and continues to call me even in the face of my inadequacies.

This past week one of our deacons Ian Roos sent me an email in which he reminded me of the words of the English mystic of the fourteenth century Julian of Norwich. They were words I had read during my early periods of doubt, but that I had completely forgotten in the intervening years. Julian writes of a vision she had from God:

"Also in this he showed a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut in the palm of my hand, and it was round as a ball. I looked thereupon with my eye of

understanding and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was generally answered thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it.' And so all things have their being by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it; the second that God loves it; the third that God keeps it."

Indeed, I have been kept. This fact has never eradicated disappointment, but it has sustained me, reminding me time and time again from where my help comes and how much I need it.

The second is, God has led me into a new place. Fundamental to the Christian theology of creation is the fact that life is birthed from darkness. Vital to our theology of redemption is that there are no lost causes; hope is birthed out of hopelessness. And central to our theology of resurrection is that life arises out of death. From a faith perspective, disappointment is never the end of the story. Not matter how much it clouds our vision or pushes down upon us, the story is not over yet. Our faith in the resurrected Christ reminds us that green shoots will always emerge from the ruin and the rubble. They may not be the green shoots we hoped for, but they are there just the same if we only look to see them.

I have discovered in my own story that in order to allow new life to be birthed in and through me, I have to let the disappointments go. I must allow the rubble to fall from my clutching hands so I am free to embrace what God offers in its place. If I am forever clutching on to a vision of what might have been, I am unable to celebrate the beauty of what is. As the people of God made their way back to Jerusalem, they were kept by God and led by God into a new beginning. As you continue on the journey in 2011, know my friends that you are kept in God's hand and invited again into new life. I can vouch for it. Amen.