

Tuesday

God is our shelter and strength; or is God? (Psalm 46:1) - *Stephan de Beer*

Most versions of Psalm 46 verse 1, proclaims: “God is our refuge and strength”. It then says, God is “an ever-present help in times of trouble” (New International Version); or “a very present help in times of trouble” (King James Version). Ever-present and very present!

We can hide in God, when we are troubled, or in trouble, and God will be our refuge, present to us. We can throw ourselves at God, when we are weak, and God will be our strength. I particularly like the Good News translation of Psalm 46:1, saying: “God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble”.

How do we read this in a context of homelessness though? If I had no shelter at night, how do I hear that God is my shelter? For some, indeed, this might be comfort, carrying them through their darkest nights on the streets. For others, it might sound like an indictment, questioning the nature of this God. Because if God was my shelter, who is purported to care so deeply for my welfare, why would this God not make sure that I find shelter?

This God, who is ever-present and known to be my troubles, should know my mental health condition, and how I have lost my friends and family and income, when another episode of psychosis kicked in. This God should know how the depths of dependency on substances have tripped me up, time and time again. Where was this God when I was beaten and left for dead by my boyfriend, or did God take his side? I came from prison, wanting to make amends, but rejected by all my previous loved ones, with no prospect of work, and the streets became my home. I am a veteran who fought a war, and every night I wake up seeing faces of civilians I had to kill. I am old and forgotten by my children, who wrote me off. My meagre pension does not afford my a room even, because places became too pricey for the likes of me to stay.

Yet, God is our shelter and strength. A God who does not ask how deserving I am of his love and care; who does not rate the merit of my poverty or loneliness before inviting in; who does not discern whether I am a truly worthy homeless person, or just a riff-raff, no-good who will waste God’s time. A God who is ever-present in my every trouble, even though it might be dark and profane, for good Christian people not to want to be with me. This God *is* my shelter and strength. This God’s love, though, is such, that this God also wants *me* to have shelter and strength. This God is not an abstraction and this God’s love and embrace are not pie-in-the-sky, philosophical ideas or esoteric, spiritual ideals. This God is the same God who became human to be with us in our homelessness, abandonment and loneliness. This God is concrete. This God, who is my shelter and strength, wants to make me shelter and give me strength.

This God cries out to the people who praise him every day, to ask: ‘How do you stand with those who lack strength, and those who have no shelter? Will you open up for them, so they be sheltered, and strengthened, by the wings of my people? Will you share your resources and land to build houses and plant gardens, and let them build houses and plant gardens, and eat and drink and live together, in my city?’

In a world where millions are homeless, and need to be housed; and hungry and need to be fed; the solution is not in spiritual escapisms. Our spiritualities of freedom and generosity and justice tell us what to do: which is to do something about those unhoused, and unfed. Just as we create companies for our own benefit to house the wealthy, we have to create companies with those who

are poor, for their empowerment. And they will find God as their shelter and strength in the places we make together – old people will live in decent housing; and people who are ill will be nurtured in love; and those who struggle to kick their addictions, invited to belong, against the odds; and those abused, a place where they can learn to trust again. And those who know how to make money will create investment funds that will resource the initiatives God's Spirit sparks, and those who are sceptics will be surprised as they see unfold in front of their eyes, the sheltering of God's forgotten people.

Across our nation and in every city, such communities and movements already exist. Often they are the mustard seeds. Perhaps Covid-19 calls for these mustard seeds to be recognized. To be sown all over the place. In every suburb and township and inner city and informal settlement. Until they bear fruit, and the people will say:

“Indeed, our God is a shelter and strength, to all of us. When we were in trouble, this God was ever-present, and mobilised the wealth of his diverse household, and invited me in!”.

Prayer

God, be our shelter and strength
See our bruised hearts and hear our troubled songs
And come to our rescue.

And as we feel your embrace,
May we make shelter for others
So they can find strength
And healing from their wounds.

Not temporary places that might disappear like mist before the sun
But places that will be like your ever-present care,
For a generation to come.

And together, may we be free –
To see you, our shelter and strength
In the city of our God.

Amen