

Tuesday

Reflections on Psalm 3. 21 April 2020 - Klippies Kritzinger

The Book of Psalms, or the Psalter, has been the prayer book of the people of Israel and of the church from almost three thousand years. It is where we go in times of joy and celebration, in times of repentance, in times of crisis. The Psalms are a shelter, a refuge for us all, whatever our needs, whatever our achievements. It is a home to live in; a park to play in; a huge maze full of surprising alleys – and even some dead ends.

The Psalms were not composed in the first place to be studied, but to be sung and chanted. Certainly to be read out aloud. The Psalter invites us into a community of worship and confession, complaint and praise. It draws us into a movement of believers who will not accept the world as it is, who will not affirm it is as inevitable. As believers who have been drawn into this movement of faith and hope, praise and protest, we affirm that the world – everything in it, everyone living in it – belongs to the living God (Ps 24:1) and so we receive it as a gift from the hand of our Creator. And therefore we choose everyday to walk and stand and sit on the way of God, not on the way of the wicked (Ps 1).

So I invite you, on your own or with a group of friends, to read Psalm 3 out loud.

A Psalm of David,
when he fled from his son Absalom.

O LORD, how many are my foes!
Many are rising against me;
² many are saying to me,
"There is no help for you in God." Selah
³ But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory,
and the one who lifts up my head.

⁴ I cry aloud to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah
⁵ I lie down and sleep; I wake again,
for the LORD sustains me.
⁶ I am not afraid of ten thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.

⁷ Rise up, O LORD!
Deliver me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.
⁸ Deliverance belongs to the LORD;
may your blessing be on your people! Selah

We live in a time of great uncertainty and pain. Like David, when he was running for his life, hiding away from Absalom, his own son, we are surrounded by enemies. The tiny, invisible enemy called the coronavirus stalks our streets, highlighting the many other enemies that live on our streets and in the structures of our city, our country, our world. We recognise the enemies that make our lives miserable, that steal our simple joy of being human together before the face of God. O LORD, how many are our foes!

One powerful image found in the Psalms is that God is our refuge, shelter or fortress. The poet of Psalm 3 does not use that strong picture of safety and security. Instead he confesses God as his shield. He is a soldier out in the open, surrounded by enemies. But God is a shield all around him, protecting him from danger. We shield ourselves – and we shield one another – from this virus by observing physical distance, wearing face masks, washing and sanitising our hands. We must do all this. It is our loving duty to each other. But in faith we also need to lift our gaze to notice the tall shield of the living God surrounding us, covering us. The tall shield of a Zulu warrior is called *isihlanga* and one design of it looks like this:



I hope some craftsmen and women can make badges like this for us to wear, carved from wood or made with beads, to remind us that God is our shield. It can become our coronashield, our commitment to trust in God's protection – and therefore to shield ourselves and to shield one another from this infection.

The poet of Psalm 3 also affirms God as her glory, her dignity, her worth. It is quite surprising to hear the words: "You, O Lord, ... are my glory." The Hebrew word translated as glory can also mean weight, dignity, or importance. Our human dignity is not given to us by the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. *God* is our dignity, our *seriti*, our *isithunzi*, our *menswaardigheid*. And the Constitution merely echoes and affirms that. Human dignity is not a *thing* that someone can give to us or take away from us. It is not a *thing* that we can give to someone else, not even by including them, by being kind to them, by giving them shelter. Dignity is a relationship – it is to live before the face of God, in the presence of God, as a community of dignified human beings. In God's light we see everyone around us in a new way; we discover our common dignity in the God who made us, who shields us. We receive dignity from one another: *motho ke motho ka batho*. Antjie Krog calls this "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness." We move shielded-and-shielding towards the dignity we have received.

The poet also confesses: "You, O Lord, ... lift up my head." So often our heads are hanging, we are shamed, humiliated, hungry, thirsty, unemployed, pressed down, addicted, depressed. If we look down

on ourselves we cannot be shielded, we cannot shield others, we cannot live with dignity. God is the one who raises the dead, and who lifts up our heads. Let us raise our voices to this God: "I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill."

The last two verses of the Psalm show that God does not only defend; God also attacks. We may call on God to get up and overcome our enemies, to "break their teeth," to neutralise and disempower them, to overcome the established habits, social patterns and structures that exclude and oppress people. This is the power of the resurrection, the power of the One who raises the dead, who overcomes the power of evil in this world, on this earth, here and now. "Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people!"

Prayer (or liturgy)

If you are together with someone else, pray this prayer responsively (call and response, L and C)

L: We live in a society where people are killed and injured in armed robberies, in traffic accidents, in domestic violence, in political killings, in the covid-19 pandemic. LORD, how many are our enemies!

C: But you, LORD, are a shield around us,

L: You are our glory,

C: You lift our heads high

L: We live in a society where women are underpaid and abused, trafficked and raped. LORD, how many are our enemies!

C: But you, LORD, are a shield around us,

L: You are our glory,

C: You lift our heads high

L: We live in a society where children are hungry and neglected, bullied and abused. LORD, how many are our enemies!

C: But you, LORD, are a shield around us,

L: You are our glory,

C: You lift our heads high

L: We live in a society where power is abused to exclude and oppress, not to care and shield. LORD, how many are our enemies!

C: But you, LORD, are a shield around us,

L: You are our glory,

C: You lift our heads high

L: We live in a society where words are used to humiliate, to insult, to gossip, to condemn. LORD, how many are our enemies!

C: But you, LORD, are a shield around us,

L: You are our glory,

C: You lift our heads high

Amen