

## Lament and Transfiguration

Proper 26, Year A, RCL. Psalm 43 (with Psalm 42 in addition). The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost. October 30, 2011. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

They have done good work as two different psalms for a long time, but they were originally one composition. I'm talking about Psalms 42 and 43. We recited Psalm 43 this morning, so we're going to recite the part that precedes it. Please turn to page 643 in the Book of Common Prayer. Now let's recite Psalm 42 in unison.

(The congregation does so.)

There are refrains and themes in common between Psalm 42 and Psalm 43, so much so that it's pretty clear they are the first and second half of the same lament. This lament has two themes. First of all, the poet misses divine worship at the Jerusalem Temple, where apparently he has had an official role. Secondly, he is beset by enemies. For those two reasons God seems far from the poet—who might have been King David, the traditional author of the Book of Psalms. But he might as easily have been someone else, because it's clear from the evidence in the Book of Psalms that David himself did not write all of them. The psalms in general are a collection of very old Jewish religious poetry, often intended for use in worship, and composed long before the time of Jesus.

But in any case the author of this two-part psalm displays a characteristic widely observable among people of faith in all ages: things do not always go well for them; they long for a more direct, fulfilling experience of God; and they continue to do good work for God even though they are beset with trouble.

This psalm itself is a fine piece of poetry. As a religious lament in the Judeo-Christian tradition you could set it beside such great laments as "Affliction I" by George Herbert, a 17<sup>th</sup> century priest in the Church of England (and one of my favorite poets).

### **The Affliction (I)**

BY [GEORGE HERBERT](#) 1593–1633 George Herbert

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,

I thought the service brave;

So many joys I writ down for my part,

Besides what I might have

Out of my stock of natural delights,

Augmented with thy gracious benefits.

I looked on thy furniture so fine,

And made it fine to me;

Thy glorious household-stuff did me entwine,

And 'tice me unto thee.

Such stars I counted mine: both heav'n and earth;

Paid me my wages in a world of mirth.

What pleasures could I want, whose King I serv'd,

Where joys my fellows were?

Thus argu'd into hopes, my thoughts reserv'd  
    No place for grief or fear.  
Therefore my sudden soul caught at the place,  
And made her youth and fierceness seek thy face.

At first thou gav'st me milk and sweetnesses;  
    I had my wish and way;  
My days were straw'd with flow'rs and happiness;  
    There was no month but May.  
But with my years sorrow did twist and grow,  
And made a party unawares for woe.

My flesh began unto my soul in pain,  
    "Sicknesses cleave my bones;  
Consuming agues dwell in ev'ry vein,  
    And tune my breath to groans."  
Sorrow was all my soul; I scarce believ'd,  
Till grief did tell me roundly, that I liv'd.

When I got health, thou took'st away my life,  
    And more, for my friends die;  
My mirth and edge was lost, a blunted knife  
    Was of more use than I.  
Thus thin and lean without a fence or friend,  
I was blown through with ev'ry storm and wind.

Whereas my birth and spirit rather took  
    The way that takes the town;  
Thou didst betray me to a ling'ring book,  
    And wrap me in a gown.  
I was entangled in the world of strife,  
Before I had the power to change my life.

Yet, for I threaten'd oft the siege to raise,  
    Not simp'ring all mine age,  
Thou often didst with academic praise  
    Melt and dissolve my rage.  
I took thy sweet'ned pill, till I came where  
I could not go away, nor persevere.

Yet lest perchance I should too happy be  
    In my unhappiness,  
Turning my purge to food, thou throwest me  
    Into more sicknesses.  
Thus doth thy power cross-bias me, not making  
Thine own gift good, yet me from my ways taking.

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me  
    None of my books will show;  
I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree,  
    For sure then I should grow  
To fruit or shade: at least some bird would trust  
Her household to me, and I should be just.

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;  
    In weakness must be stout;

Well, I will change the service, and go seek  
Some other master out.  
Ah my dear God! though I am clean forgot,  
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

Writing two thousand years after the writer of Psalms 42 and 43, Herbert had a similar feeling of loss, of something essential absent from his life. He, too, missed the lifting joy and delight of his former experiences of God and felt...not exactly abandoned, more like ignored, or given a distressingly low priority in God's kindly attention. The message from the poet to God is, "I'm hanging in there, I'm being patient, but this is a hell of a thing to go through for someone who loves you."

The comparison with hell was deliberate, not simply the usual expletive. These poetic laments express the typical human intuition that God should be ensuring, for those of us who care about him, that our time on earth should be, well, heaven-like. But so often the heavenly dimensions of existence are not what we experience. It turns out that God's love must be waged in an earthly situation so infected with and disabled by evil, both inside and outside the person who has to slog through it, that it sometimes feels as if there is not much point. But once one has the taste for God's company, one knows that nothing less will do. So it was for Job in his afflictions, so it was for John of the Cross in the dark night of the soul, so it was for Jeremiah as his prophecy was ignored, so it was for our psalmist and for George Herbert, and so it is for every Godly individual who perseveres in the desert of divine absence trusting the holy love he has tasted and known to be real.

And yes, so it was for Jesus, who quoted another great psalm as he died under torture: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is the beginning of Psalm 22, and Jesus probably went on to recite as much of that psalm as he could get out. It would have been appropriate for a devout Jew facing certain death to do so, and in this as in so many of his uses of the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) Jesus was signaling the fulfillment of his mission for the rescue and renewal of creation.

The world is always a boiling stew of risk, and one of the routine risks of the devout life is to find ourselves in a desert where God seems not so near at hand, but destructive trouble seems very near indeed. Whenever we endure the forsakenness of those who wait on a silent God while danger prowls and snarls and snaps, we recapitulate the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross (though it is usually put the other way around, that Jesus recapitulates in his suffering the suffering of the world). What this means is that such a lament as Job's or the psalmist's or George Herbert's is not an act of despair but an act of faith: they are continuing the conversation with God, asserting their relationship with God, under extremely difficult conditions.

God is the one being we can talk to like this on a regular basis. Our tolerance for one another's whining (as we tend to see it) is fairly limited, though some of us (thanks be to God!) have the gift of patient listening. God, and those who get to know him, are aware of what it takes to overcome the world. What it takes is to face the worst knowing that love, beauty, peace, delight, wholeness, justice and mercy are real; knowing that they reside in the Maker of all things who will in the end prevail. And more than that: knowing that no sacrifice, even the fall of a sparrow to earth (Matthew 10:9), is wasted in the eyes of the Almighty.

To get to know God is to accept the renewal of God's image in us. That is what holiness is. Holiness wades through the brokenness of creation, healing as it goes. The great religious laments trail and swirl

and fling the beauty of poetic language through the ugliness of sin and death. They give voice to God's call to us, and his call is this: Don't waste the sacrifice. Don't waste Jesus' death under torture, Job's integrity under affliction, Jeremiah's witness under persecution, the psalmist's languishing under ill-use by others and being deprived of Temple worship, George Herbert's grief under poor health and the fading of the high hopes of youth. The great laments of our religious tradition are not the wistful griping of those with little faith; they are bracing reminders to us that our suffering is understood, appreciated and gathered up into the life of the Most Blessed Trinity. Where it is transfigured by the beauty of the infinite glory of God—who, out of the generosity so characteristic of him, has given glimpses of that transfigured beauty in the poetry of the laments themselves.

So: read Psalms 42 and 43 together, feel and understand how God holds you, the poem and its author in his hand, and let the beauty and the sorrow transfigure you. Don't waste the sacrifice.