**Messiah’s suffering** 26/3/23

Read: Psalm 22, Mark 15:16-37

Text: Psalm 22:1-21

Psalms: 92:1-7, 148:7-14, 116:12-19, 134

Everyone wants to know the future, and there is no shortage of men or women predicting the future. When I was a boy I was told the future was bright. I remember man walking on the moon. Only people in the church were speaking of the end of the world. Now I that am old, it is the secular humanists who are warning us about the end of the world, and, for some reason, getting excited about man going to the moon!

If you take the time to ‘fact check’ the predictions made by our ‘experts’ a few decades ago you will find that few, if any, have come to pass- predictions about sea levels, about world peace, about the end of poverty, or whatever. Yet many blindly cling to these predictions of the experts, with their crystal balls or computer models, not realizing that we have a book in which most of what is written has come to pass, and what has not yet come to pass surely will. This book may not detail sea level changes but it does tell of the God who assigned a limit for the sea (Ps 8:29).

The Bible goes beyond created things to tell us about the creator himself. It tells us where we came from and where we are going, after death. It tells of God the creator entering our world in the form of his Son, Jesus Christ. We read in the NT about Jesus being born some two thousand years ago, about his death and his resurrection. One of the amazing things about this history is that it was predicted in great detail. Jesus himself predicted his death and resurrection, but he also said that all Scripture, ‘the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms’ spoke of him and were fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44).

We know Isaiah 53, and how unmistakeably these words about the suffering servant apply to Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly, the words of the psalmist in Psalm 22, unmistakeably point to Jesus of Nazareth. We know because Jesus himself took some of the words as his own, and others are quoted in the NT with reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. The prophetic aspect of this psalm is inescapable, but this does not mean it has no application whatsoever to David’s life, much of which he spent escaping king Saul; there is however, no historical reference in the title of the psalm.

Psalm 22 can be taken in two parts, the first a desperate cry to God for help, and the second, praise to God for deliverance. We will look at the first part now under two subheadings: ‘Cry for God’s help’ and ‘Encircled by enemies’.

**1. Cry for God’s help**

Most of us know the words, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ as the translation of Aramaic or Hebrew words spoken by Jesus from the cross (Mat 27:46). Jesus knew Psalm 22 of course, and was using these words in prayer at this terrible time in his life, and a momentous time for the world in terms of conquering sin and death. Quoting these words in prayer shows that Jesus knew the Psalms, and that this particular psalm was on his mind as he hung on the cross. If Jesus took words from a psalm in prayer, you can do the same- if you know the psalms! The psalms not only speak to us, they speaks for us, giving us words for prayer, as well as for praise. How blessed you are to be in a church that sings the psalms of the Bible.

It was the ninth hour or 3pm when Jesus cried out in a loud voice with the words of verse 1. He had initially spoken words of comfort to other people from the cross, but then darkness fell. It was after three hours of darkness that Jesus made this cry. In this time Jesus was obviously focussed on his relationship with his Father. We struggle to comprehend the depths of this intimate relationship, but these words tell us that he felt forsaken by God the Father at this time, and this can only be because he was bearing our sin; ‘He who knew no sin became sin for us’ (2Cor 5:21).

The cry of this psalm goes on from expressing forsakenness to feeling that God is far from helping him, and was not listening to his groaning and cries for help. He was crying out day and night, but ‘You do not hear’ (22:2). Jesus prayed regularly but his ‘troubled’ prayers began on the night of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane: ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me’ (Mat 26:39). After his arrest, Jesus was mocked and ‘despised by the people (22:6).

Before moving on in the psalm to prophecy about mocking, we pause to note the back and forth nature of this psalm, cries of despair alternating with, ‘But you God’. After the initial cry for help we read, ‘But you are holy’ (22:3); there is another, ‘But you’ in verse 9, and again in verse 19. Even as he cries for help, the writer remembers that God is enthroned in heaven. The phrase, ‘Enthroned in the praises of Israel’ (22:3) is not easy to understand, and indeed is translated as, ‘You are the praise of Israel’ in the NIV. Yet when one commentator asks, ‘Are our songs a throne for God, or a platform for man’, we get a sense of the importance of our praise in glorifying God in heaven. And what better words do we have with which to praise God than those he had given us?

When the writer turns to God, in the midst of his being forsaken, he remembers what his fathers told him about trusting in God and being delivered. Three times he says, ‘They trusted’, followed by ‘were delivered’, ‘were saved’, and ‘were not put to shame’ (22:4, 5). When you are crying to the Lord in the midst of trouble do you pause to read your Bible, where God’s great works of deliverance are recorded? Do you pause to consider the cross of Jesus and remember the greatest deliverance of all?

In contrast to being far from God, the writer felt the nearness of his enemies. They made him feel like a worm (22:6). As I dug my garden a lot of worms appeared; some perished before I swapped my spade for a fork. But what do a few worms matter? The mocking and ridicule of men made this man feel despised and rejected. ‘Despised and rejected by men’ is what the prophet Isaiah said about the suffering servant or Messiah (Isa 53:3). Job was compared to a worm by his ‘friend’, who assumed he was suffering because of his sin.

In telling us how Jesus was treated by the Jews and the Romans after his arrest, and as he hung on the cross, Matthew has them shouting, ‘He trusted in God, let Him deliver Him now if he will have him’ (Mat 27:43). He was using the words of Psalm 22 to describe this mocking. Jesus faced scorn from his own people, from those he came to save, as he hung on the cross. How sad it is to see and hear still today, people mocking Jesus, the Son of God, who died that we might live: ‘That we might become the righteousness of God in him’ (2Cor 5:21).

The ‘But God’ that comes next in this prayer or psalm focusses on ‘me’; ‘He took me out of the womb’ (22:9). Elsewhere the psalmist says, ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Ps 139:14). Others may call you ‘a worm and no man’, but you are precious to God. It was the Lord who gave you birth physically, and spiritually if you are born again. He called you when you were on your mother’s breasts (22:9, 10). He made you his covenant child: ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. God was the God of his fathers (22:4) and also his own God (22:10). Such knowledge is too wonderful for me! His fellow man, even his nearest and dearest, may be ridiculing him, but his God would surely help him; there was no one else (22:11). Even in the darkest hour he would cling to God, which is what Jesus did on the cross; there was no one else to help him!

**2. Encircled by enemies**

In the second part of the first half of this psalm the writer expresses his fears in metaphorical terms; it is as if savage beasts are circling to attack. As a young boy growing up on a farm I was afraid of bulls. We had a nasty jersey bull with horns. Sometimes I would dream of a bull charging me. I still remember pushing my bed hard against the wall so the bulls could not get me! Bulls of Bashan, or the Golan Heights, were big and strong because of the rich pasture. We know how bulls stare and roar before charging their victim.

David also knew about lions; they were prevalent in Israel in his day. He may have killed lions with his sling shot, but still they are scary beasts. Being surrounded by people who hate you, as Jesus was at the cross, seems like being surrounded by roaring bulls or lions. Dogs will be added to this metaphor when we come to verse 16, not pet dogs but wild dogs or stray dogs that are hungry.

The suffering of this servant of God becomes physical in verse 14. Such suffering was not a mark of David’s life but it was a mark of the final hours of Jesus’ life. The writer speaks of his tongue clinging to the roof of his mouth because of extreme thirst. His body is weak and his bones are sticking out (22:14, 16). His heart is about to melt and give up as he contemplates death. Jesus had not been starved, but hanging almost naked on the cross his bones would have stuck out. His garments were taken and divided among his executors (22:18).

Jesus cried out from the cross, ‘I thirst’ (John 19:28). He said this to fulfil Scripture, according the apostle John. In another messianic psalm, as well as here in verse 15 of Psalm 22, we find references to thirst (Ps 69:21). John goes on to record Jesus saying, as his last words from the cross, ‘It is finished’, words that we will link to the closing words of this psalm (John 19:30).

The psalmist writes, ‘They pierced My hands and My feet’ (22:16), words obviously fulfilled with reference to Jesus being nailed to the cross. A Roman soldier also pierced his side with a spear to see if he was dead (John 19:34). It is almost as if John is going through this psalm as he records the death of Jesus; although his quote about people looking on the one who they pierced comes from Zechariah 12:10. Here in this psalm, ‘They look and stare at Me’ (22:17). We briefly note that the word ‘pierce’ is actually ‘lion’ in the Hebrew text, but before the vowels were inserted it could have been a word meaning ‘to dig a round hole’. This is the meaning found in the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint.

‘They divide my garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots’ (22:18). This is another prophetic reference, not something David ever experienced. In quoting these words, Matthew declares them to be the words of the prophet (Mat 27:35). Indeed, in David’s day crucifixion was not known; even in the time of Jesus it was the Romans, not the Jews, who crucified criminals.

This psalm began with the desperate plea, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me’, and the question, ‘Why are you so far from helping Me’ (22:1). After consideration of the sovereignty of God and the help he gave to ‘our fathers’, as well as his own preciousness in the eyes of God, the writer prays with more confidence, ‘But you, O Lord, do not be far from Me’ (22:19). With confidence, with faith deeper than the pain he was experiencing, he prays to God ‘My Strength’ to deliver him from the sword and save his precious life from the enemies attacks; these enemies are again pictured as dogs, lions and bulls or wild oxen (22:21).

Jesus’ final word from the cross was, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’ (Luke 23:46). He had no one else to help him (22:11). God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He will never leave you or forsake you, so trust him to the very end- and beyond. Jesus did! All you have to do is ask, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.