

A Psalm of Praise and Pleading on the Eve of War or The Last Enemy Is Death

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

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Biblical faith, of course, is resolutely covenantal, with both parties—God and God’s people—deeply engaged in interactive communication with each other. That covenantal dialogue of engagement, moreover, is conducted in the conviction that utterance to the partner does impact the partner in important ways. That is, such communication is, according to biblical faith, genuine engagement. Harold Fisch, in resisting the temptation that such faithful utterance is mere subjectivity, judges:

This becomes an article of faith for D. Robertson, who declares that “the Israelite community knows what Shelley knows, that no petition from them is going to lead God to make human life basically different.” This is *not* what the Israelite community knows: it knows that, mysterious though the ways of God are, there is still a potency in prayer, a power not to be rigidly separated from outer events in the “world”—“this poor man cried and the Lord heard, and saved him out of all his troubles” (34:6)...

Against the purity of the inner dialogue, or rather in addition to it, we have the emphasis repeated here, as in many other psalms, on the comforts of the Temple worship, where the well-trying and well-established forms of ritual observance bring to the dialogue with God an institutional basis and framework.

[Harold Fisch, *Poetry With A Purpose* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 110-111]

The meeting between God and God’s people is precisely for such interaction.

Given such a dialogic assumption, it is conventional that *God’s word to God’s people* is in the sermon (the burden of the preacher) and *the word of God’s people to God* is in prayer. For the most part, that seems a responsible and adequate way to understand the dialogue. It is clear, however, that the *word of the sermon* tends to be proclaimed with much more authority and clarity than the word of God’s people to God in prayer, so that the communication tends to be quite one-sided; in such a practice the word of God’s people in prayer may become so deferential and mute that it does not hold up its end of the transaction.

For that reason, I have suggested that on occasion it is appropriate in preaching that the preacher should not address the church with God’s word, but the sermon might well be “our turn” to speak the word of the church that might be addressed even to God. Such an articulation might be especially appropriate in times of bewilderment and

deep anxiety when a clear word from God is not readily available. Such communal utterance via the pastor might be an occasion for candor that in turn creates an environment of receptivity for what might then be uttered of the gospel.

I suspect that in the cluster of circumstances stretching from 9/11 to the self-indulgent U.S. invasion of Iraq, there might be a circumstance for such a slot on preaching. On such an occasion, the preacher might well voice the bewilderment and anxiety, the anger and confusion, as well as the faith of the church. In the sermon that follows, Ralph Hawkins has done just such a daring act to bring to speech the mix of faith and fear that characterizes the people of God. Every preacher knows that our present circumstance is a strenuous venue for preaching. The purpose of such a sermon, I take it, is not to duck the risky work of proclamation, but to recognize that the church meets in a deep season of unresolved. Such candor is an important component of faith, a public acknowledgement of the crisis of faith, precisely the arena in which God's spirit may make things new.

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In the tradition of the psalmists, in such prayers as Psalm 102, and in the spirit of their vocation as language-crafters and prayer-makers for the priestly people of God, I humbly offer the following psalm¹ as an interpretation of the Word and as our speech to God in these troubled days:

To you, O Father of Grace, we lift our voices;
to you, Creator of Life, we speak our supplications.

Do not hide your face from us
in this day of our distress.
Turn your ear our way;
answer us with haste as we cry out.
Ours is a life filled with anxiety;
we are a people full of dread.

Into a sanctuary of gospel grace we have gathered;
from a world of relentless violence we have come.
All around us are deeds of arrogance and anger;
revenge and more revenge are our neighbors:

old wounds opened
cultures clashed
planes hijacked
towers felled
anthrax found
troops sent out
hills/caves hunted
plastic/tape procured
threat colors adopted
war now engineered.

We are this day like a people torn in two:
Our hearts are here with you in praise;
our minds are all over the world in fear.

As tanks line up and missiles depart,
as canisters turn up and plots are revealed,
it is now clear again:
Our days are like the evening shadow;
we wither away so easily, like dry grass.

But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever;
your good name endures despite such threats.
You and you alone have made us image-bearers.
You have made us female and male,
neighbors in our imaged humanity;
even us, made covenant people by your grace.

You spoke and the world gladly came to be ...
You brought the creation safely across the waters ...
You called old men and old women to make new life ...
You made in them a contract to bless the world ...
You brought your children out of pyramid-bondage.

We were often confused to see you make wars of old,
for we thought you were the God of life.
But then, in the fullness of your time,
you confirmed our glad suspicions:
You and you alone sent your Peacemaker;
you delivered unto us the fullness of who you are.
Now we guess and conjecture no longer;
now your will is as clear as his good face.

You have been the kind maker of the world,
Father to an eternal nation of your graced people.
Come to our aid again;
Create new life among us once more.
Rise up and have compassion on our world,
now so torn asunder with
our deathly machines
our deathly wills
our deathly times

You do not desire more war;
more calculated death is not your aim.
Soften hearts and minds with your peace;
obstruct war games with your destiny.
Come and destroy your last grand enemy:
make death itself your final spoil.

To you, O Christ now risen, we lift our voices,
to you, O Savior of life, we speak our supplications.

Yours is now a resurrected life
and you have put us on that path.
You live with the Father in everlasting life;
we live with each other in mounting threat.
Your wounds are rich, yet now not deathly;
our wounds abound, now threatening war.

In your resurrection state,
come and enact your ministry among us again:
preach again good news to the poor
release again the captives of this world
teach us again God-ways by word and deed
bless the children and even your enemies
heal the sick and bind up the brokenhearted
eat with outcasts and forgive stubborn sinners

Are we to do these things for you?
Surely your kingdom then will fall!
What is the middle way, O Christ?
What is the faithful action in this hour?
Outright war runs counter to your peace;
benign inaction seems foolish and naive.
What is the kingdom way, O Christ?
What is the calling of your graced people?

But this we know well:
God raised you, O Christ, from the dead,
vindicating your sinless life,
breaking the power of our evil,
delivering us across the water,
from death to life anew.

Now, in your foolish ways,
you have made us your covenant people:
church
holy nation
called-out ones
order of priests

So priests we will be,
with our halting prayers.

We love this nation, this America of liberty,
but still we know that we are citizens of your heaven.
We are baptized into *your* eternal nation,
and so we pray to you in our in-between state:
one foot on the ground of a united states,
another foot on the soil of your resurrection home.

In your kingdom-teaching your instructions came down;
your edict for life with you in heaven is hauntingly clear:

“pray for your enemies,”
lift up to God their lives and yours.

So let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise you O Christ,
that you looked down from your holy height,
from resurrection life you looked to earth
to stifle the terror that so fills the people,
to cut off the need for war-making plans.
Resurrection life is your agenda;
death and its agents are your last enemy.

O Christ of the kingdom way, redeem our enemies:

Osama
Saddam
Al Qaeda

and their many friends of destruction.

Invade their deathly kingdoms
with your kingdom of life.

You are the prince of peace;
you are the Lord of all new things.

As it was said of old:

“you must reign until you have put all his enemies under your feet. The last enemy to
be destroyed is death.”

O Resurrected One,
destroy it now.

To you, O Spirit Holy, we lift our voices,
to you, Sustainer of Life, we speak our supplications.

You call us *church*;
you make us a people in Christ.
But we are timid and lame:
we trust our defenses

we worship our securities
we shore up our safety

We need your power to sustain our kingdom calling;
we require your presence to live like God's people,
for we dwell in a land betwixt and between:
full of freedom, full of sin.

This land sets us free for your purposes,
and we are grateful.
This land offers its children to protect such a liberty,
and we are honored.
This land offers protections from threats all around,
and we are secured.
This land defends our peculiar call to live as New Covenant people, and so we hope
to live well, as the baptized ones.
Hear these, our words of gratitude.

But certainly you must also know
that this land affords its own evil,
this nation harbors its own sins.
And so we need your quickening power.

We are often too strong for faith
often too cynical for hope
often too preoccupied for love.
We are too wealthy for sacrificing crosses;
we are too enlightened for resurrection hope.

But you, Sprit of God, Holy Presence of Christ,
you are everywhere the giver and renewer of life:
you grace us through faith
you give us liberty in God
you sustain a land with law
you bind us together as a churchly people.

Certainly you can then again blow your winds;
certainly you can renew the mess of our world.

Hover over the lands of our enemies
and birth in them today
new life
new peace
new hope
new rule
new trust
in the one true God of life.

Brood over the lands we call our temporary home,
and birth in this nation

new faith
new restraint
new kindness
new humility
new trust
in the only Lord of life.

In a broken and fearful world,
you give us the courage

to pray without ceasing ...
to witness among all neighbors near and far ...
to unmask idolatries in church and state ...
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced ...
to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

Send down your Courage this day.
Blow among us with Pentecost power.
Death shall not abide.
Spirit winds will surely blow.

Oh, how we long for resurrection life!
Oh, how we can see it now in our hearts!

Oh, how we pray that what has begun in First Fruits
will be brought to completion here and now, among us!
O God of such new-life-power,
We long to worship and serve again
with those brothers and sisters we have lost.
We long for a time when guns
will be traded for bread.
We long for a time when our ships of battle
will be scrapped for arks of grace.
We long for a season when war
will give way to friendship.
Then we will worship with you, and you will be all in all!

We hear the scoffers all around and in us:
Unrealistic! Pie-in-the-sky! Impossible!
But so is Easter morning.
Yet you raised him again to new life.
Wonderfully impossible!
Amaze us again.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit:

“You must reign until you have put all his enemies under your feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

Destroy it now.

Amen.

Note

¹Much of the language and style for this psalm comes from the following sources: Psalm 102, 1 Corinthians 15, Matthew 5:9, and the Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith*, 1984.