

Psalm 42 and 43

At this time of national grief and emotional trauma following three horrendous events over these last few weeks I thought this evening we would consider the two Psalms set in the lectionary for this evening Psalms 42 and 43. They are two Psalms which are in effect one song in two parts which is why it seemed logical to omit saying the Gloria between them.

The Psalms are 150 reflections on the whole of life lived under God. They are out pourings to God of the writer's deepest feelings many of which we can identify with.

In them we find sorrow, joy, frustration, anger and praise all brought to God in response to life in all its variety.

In Psalms 42 and 43 the Psalmist is going through a dark time emotionally those of you who have experienced depression will be able to identify with this. Life is simply too much. He tries to describe how he feels using something he understands and is familiar with, the wilderness. Those of you who have been to the Holy Land will have passed through the barren wastes of parched land with the occasional scrub

bush and no sigh of water or shade to give refreshment or shelter.

For most of us, life rarely progresses on a completely even keel for long, we all have our emotional ups and downs. Some experience these highs and lows more keenly than others but it the rare and fortunate person who can say they have never been through a period of being down in the dumps and there are few of us who have not experienced the depths of despair at some time or another. That deep black hole, which it seems impossible to climb out of, even if, by some miracle we managed to feel motivated to try.

It is in that state of mind when God seems far away and we feel at our most abandoned and worthless and at rock bottom that perhaps we need the psalms most.

Over the last weeks as a nation we have been through several horrific traumas. Westminster Bridge and Parliament, the Manchester arena, the recent the horrific fire in North London. Today we heard of another nation plunged into mourning as news from Portugal emerged that 62 people have died in a forest fire many of whom are thought to have burnt to death in their cars.

I was talking to someone on the morning after the news broke of the Grenfell Tower fire and her question to me was “Why does this seem so much worse than the other tragedies? I am so much more affected by it than the Westminster attack and even the Manchester disaster.” It is a question which many people have asked themselves?

In all these tragedies innocent people have lost their lives or been injured.

In all three of the disasters here in Britain there were expressions of grief and a wonderful abundance of charity and community spirit.

But the fire in North Kensington has precipitated a huge out pouring of emotion not just of grief, and horror but of a great deal of anger. An anger expressed in a way which was not so overtly obvious following the tragedies perpetrated by terrorists.

And yet the local community have worked together to provide the basic needs for those who have lost everything.

One of the big problems in this most recent catastrophe is the element of uncertainty. The

not knowing definitely about the missing and having the certain knowledge that they died in the fire painful though that would be.

The fire brigade and police force who did the most amazing work way beyond the call of duty and often with no thought for their own safety have the unenviable task of locating the victims in dangerous and difficult circumstances many bodies possibly buried under fallen ceilings on floors which are unsafe.

Give us numbers they shouted but were answered by only the numbers of dead and injured which were confirmed.

We want the bodies of our relatives so we can mourn properly very understandable and I'm sure I would feel the same. Some religions require burial within 24 hours and the absence of the body of their loved ones compounds their anguish.

The deep distress of those caught up in this disaster over rides all else.

In the midst of all this the local community have provided emergency food, shelter and clothing. The need for emotional support and counselling has been recognised, the government has

announced financial help and the slow process of investigation as to the cause has begun. People of different faiths and none are all working together to try and ease the lot of these poor traumatised individuals and families. And support the emergency services faced with perhaps the worst incident of their careers and having to deal with the search and recovery process.

We as a church community hold them in our prayers but as individuals we may well find our faith challenged by the events.

We are besieged by questions and uncertainties. Why did this happen? Why was there only one staircase? Why did the fire spread so fast? Why so many innocent victims?

And as we question, our thoughts are with those who are going through the most unimaginable suffering as a result of what's happened.

The Psalmist says 'people say to me continually "Where is now your God?"'

As Christians we don't have all the answers we see the suffering and we grieve;

we see injustice and we are angry. But we also see the need and show love and compassion in many different ways as we are able.

The Psalms remind us that nothing is too small or too big for God to handle.

Nothing is too emotionally charged, too embarrassing, too overwhelming or too trivial to bring to Him.

In Psalms 42 and 43 the writer acknowledges (even in his deep distress when God seems so far away) “an increasing reliance on the things which cannot be shaken even though the storm of suffering has given no signs of abating.”¹

Three times he says “Why are you so cast down, O my soul, and why are you so disquieted with in me? Hope in God: for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

Living in this broken and divided world, experiencing at first and second hand the terrible nature of life with its acts of atrocity and evil, and horrific disasters such as we witnessed last week in the Grenfell Tower fire and our own personal tragedies, an ever present reality; we need to cling to the belief that we have a God who is just and merciful, but who is also, all

¹ Page 167 Psalms 1-72 Derek Kidner Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries© 1973

loving, and always, always ready to hear our cry
whatever the depths of our despair.

“When you can’t put your prayer into words,
God hears your heart.”

Father, we commend to your faithful love
Those who are crying from the depths;
Help them to watch and pray
Through the time of their darkness,
In sure hope of the dawn of your forgiveness and
redemption

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen