

Sexagesima Sunday
Psalm 44:1-2, 7-8; 23, 25a, 26a

There is a strange change of tone in those pieces of the Psalm we spoke earlier, is there not? *You have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us*, it says, and: *In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to Your name for ever*. And then the mood seems to shift over completely, does it not? Suddenly the joyful celebration of the salvation of God seems to go away and give way to distress at His inactivity, the certainty of His favour to despair at His rejection: *Awake! Why are You sleeping, O Lord? Rouse Yourself! Do not reject us for ever!*

And suddenly, the very meaning of the initial confession of the Psalm seems to shift: *O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds You performed in their days, in the days of old: You with your own hand drove out the nations, but them You planted; You afflicted the peoples, but them You set free*. What appeared at first elation of the mighty works of God in days of old comes to seem instead a lamentation that those days are gone, that God no longer shows His people His favour, that He seems no longer to care about His people, and even to have rejected His people. *Awake! Why are You sleeping, O Lord? Rouse Yourself! Do not reject us for ever!* It is almost as if the Psalm contradicts itself. And in a way it does.

Not that the Psalm does not speak truthfully in all that it says, for it does, being the Word of God, but rather that it truthfully reflects the contradiction of real life, or more specifically: the contradiction of life with God.

We find such tension often in the Psalms; *if we read the Psalms, that is*. Joyful celebration of the salvation of God gives way to desperate cries of distress. Confession of faith and assurance of the goodness of God yield to complaints that He has failed His people and even abandoned His own goodness and faithfulness! At times, lengthy lamentations of utter despair will give way, suddenly, and with no mediating statements or no explanation whatsoever as to why, to an excited exclamation about the goodness of God.

In what we hear today, the complaint that the days are gone when God would show favour to His people, the confession that *You have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us*, that is: not only our fathers, but ourselves, also, precedes the complaint that God is now asleep.

It is as if the faithful knows that there is a greater reality than what he sees all around him and even finds in himself; that the goodness of God stands untouched, although real life gives nothing but evidence to the contrary.

Such is often the experience of faith; the holy Apostle Paul writes it: *We walk by faith, and not by sight.* And elsewhere he writes: *Hope does not put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* In other words, true faith is not the fruit of looking at how well things work out for us in this world, and counting our blessings in this world, rather, it is what God Himself works in us with His Word of salvation. As when our Lord Jesus says it, that: *in the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*

When the people of God cries out to Him, and His Christians: *Awake! Why are You sleeping, O Lord?*, what we should ask is not so much why God has fallen asleep, but rather whether we ourselves have. And we have. And we do.

In the world we do have tribulation, that is true, as the Church of Christ, and as His Christians; don't we know it?

There was a time when we would complain that God and the faith were not honoured and respected in common culture as in former days. These days it would be outright hostility against the Church of Christ and His Christians we would be likely to complain about, in common culture, and in congress, and in the courts; or the indifference and ignorance that makes otherwise benevolent authorities to issue decrees that Christians go against the Word and will of God, and which will often turn into outright persecution, when it turns out that some Christians actually take the faith more seriously than the authorities expected, so that they cannot and will not set the faith aside, and the Word and will of God.

We worry, also, for the future of the Church, do we not, and the future of our own congregation. Some worry to the point of desperation so as to suggest or even insist that in order for the Church to survive, she must abandon that which is her life as the Church of Christ, the Word and worship of God and His salvation, in which He Himself comes to His Church and His Christians and gives Himself to us, and His salvation and His own life.

We are concerned about the future of the Church, most of us. But is it something we care so much about that it could truthfully be said of us that because of our concern for the Church and the faith *our soul is bowed down to the dust*, as it said in the Psalm, and that *our belly clings to the ground?*

And is our real concern not rather that if our church continues to decline, and if the faith comes to face even greater hostility in modern society, then being Christian and being Church might become even more uncomfortable and inconvenient so as demand sacrifices of us, for real, financially and otherwise?

Well, even if it cannot be said of us that it is because of concern for the Church and the faith that *our soul is bowed down to the dust, and our belly clings to the ground*, there will have been and there will be times in the lives of most of us when it is a sentiment with which we can identify. When life itself falls apart for us and leaves us sitting around helpless in the shattered debris, wondering what became of the goodness of God, and His love for us, and longing, like the faithful in the Psalm, for former days when we were not in doubt at all that God was with us.

We might want to ask ourselves, though, if those were days not rather days when we were not aware that we had any *real* need of God since everything was going so well for us, or that we needed for Him to be real, when the faith and God Himself were rather additional extras to spice life up a bit, a source of a sense of meaning and purpose and fulfilment? The confession we hear today, was that really what was in our heart back then: *In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to Your name for ever?*

Is it really that God has fallen asleep? Or is it rather that we ourselves are no longer awake to the realities of God, and of the faith, or perhaps that we never really were?

In the world you will have tribulation, says our Lord Jesus; He never promised any differently. But take heart: I have overcome the world!

Such is the experience of the faith. And by it, God drives His Church and His Christians, constantly, to turn away from our love for this world, and our trust in this world, and turn to Him instead, and cry out, as in the Psalm: *Rise up; come to our aid! Redeem us for the sake of Your steadfast love!*

Before God we have nothing to plead, other than His own goodness, His steadfast love. Only in *His* goodness can we take refuge, helpless as we are against the forces of death around us, and in us; that love which we know because *we have heard with our ears*, as the Psalm says it, *and our fathers have told us what deeds You performed in their days, in the days of old*. Like the faithful of those days we now know as *days of old* we can but look back to the mighty deeds God performed in days of old, and cling to the assurance of His steadfast love He gave back then.

But in what we also now know as *days of old*, to which the fathers could but look forward, God has performed even greater deeds than the faithful of the Old Testament ever knew or could ever imagine, and made His goodness manifest in even greater measure.

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, writes the holy Apostle John: *that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him.* And his colleague Paul writes that *God shows His love for us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* And: *if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.* God has not fallen asleep; He has died, and He lives for ever, for our salvation. The Son of God, who is God Himself from eternity, came to us to suffer our death for us, the death due for us to die on account of our unbelief and ungodliness, the judgement of His goodness against our evil, of utter and eternal death and damnation. And He has risen from death, for so far did His righteousness outweigh our sin, His goodness our evil, that with Him having died for the sin of the world there was no need for Him to remain in death, nor for any who belong to Him. And risen from the dead He claims us as His own.

In the Word and worship of His salvation, which is the life of His Christians, and of His faithful Church, He sets before us the price He has paid to make us His own, and His promise that we shall not perish and die in His judgement on account of what we have done, and failed to do, rather, on account of what He has done, we shall live and be with Him forever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory. And with His promise, all that He promises is given, really given, to us, and to all who hear His promise in faith. We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, and now we are being saved by His life, as He lives in His Church and gives Himself to us, with all that He is, and all that is His.

And so, as we cry out to Him, as did His faithful in days of old: *Rise up; come to our help; redeem us for the sake of Your steadfast love!*, we also rejoice, in all our distress and doubt, as did His faithful in days of old: *You have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us.*

In faith we know that there is a greater reality than that which we see around us and find in ourselves; the reality of God stands untouched. And that is what is really real.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Amen.