



SHABBAT SERMON

Jonathan Magonet

In preparing this sermon I found myself returning to the opening verses of Psalm 90, not only as setting the scene for the psalm itself, but possibly also for some of those in the fourth ‘book’ of the Psalms that we have been studying this Week. Psalm 90 begins with two radically different perceptions of our relationship with God.

Adonai, Lord, You have been our home from generation to generation.
Before the mountains were born,
before You brought the earth and world to birth,
from eternity to eternity, You are *El*, You are God. (Psalm 90:1-2)

What I find so extraordinary is the dual sense of time that is evoked here. The first verse uses the phrase ‘*b’dor va-dor*’, ‘from generation to generation’. This phrase expresses the way in which the Biblical authors measured time and history as fundamental human events. Within our personal experience we can sometimes count back three generations, to great-grandparents, and can live long enough to see children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. History is measured here in terms of the span of human lifetimes and human relationships.

But the second verse imagines how time must seem to God the Creator, the God who existed before the world even came into being, and who will continue to exist into some unimaginable future, even long after the world that we know will have ceased to exist. These two radically different perspectives on time, human and divine, dominate the psalm – for God, a thousand years are like a mere fragment of a single night, but for us we live out every single moment of our allotted seventy years, with the joys and sorrows, love and loss that come our way.

Moreover, the two names of God in these verses, *Adonai* and *El*, further underscore these different perspectives. For the psalmist ‘*Adonai*’ represents the God with whom we can have an intimate relationship, the God we have experienced as our refuge throughout the generations. But the other distant, timeless God of the psalmist’s imagination is referred to as *El*, a name that suggests God as an all-powerful being, remote from human concerns. Given these totally different divine perspectives on our human existence, how is this void to be bridged?

Perhaps this dual sense of time, God’s time and our human time, and these different perceptions of the nature of God, also play out in at least some of the psalms that make up this collection.

For example, Psalm 93, celebrates this otherness of God, the powerful sovereign who establishes the universe and holds everything firmly together, even containing the raging waters of chaos. In Psalm 92, we find ourselves safely ensconced in the Temple, where we can witness with equanimity the apparent rise and success of *kol poalei aven*, ‘all workers of iniquity’, because we know

that they will be scattered, because God is forever raised on high above them. Thus far we are in a secure, regulated comfortable universe.

But with Psalm 94 a harsher reality intrudes, the destructive power of these same *poalei aven*, 'workers of iniquity' from Psalm 92 (8,10) have become tangible and present (Ps 94:4, 16), and God's people, especially the weakest amongst them, are now victims of violence and murder. Now, no longer detached, the psalmist calls on God to appear and intervene, to right these wrongs, so that righteousness and justice are restored.

Now that God's engagement with the world to bring justice has been evoked, as if God has been waiting for this invitation, the next set of psalms, 95-100, celebrate the emerging recognition amongst the nations of the world of the power of God as a true judge, bringing rescue to Israel and therefore able to perform the same task for others as well. All they have to do is abandon their own false gods, and follow as God makes a triumphal journey to Zion, to be established in the Temple. The distant God of Psalm 93, whose throne has been established from eternity, now reigns on earth. Israel, the nations and even nature celebrate this triumphal entry of God into history.

It disturbs me to say this, but Psalm 92, anchored in the peace and rest of Shabbat, reflects our own situation. Because, thank God, at least at this moment here in our sanctuary in Western Europe, we are magnificently at ease. We are the fortunate ones. From the comfort of our living rooms, or through the images on our phones and pads that are our constant companions, we can eavesdrop from a safe distance on everything that is happening. We are a new version of bystanders, those who observe from afar these myriad conflicts that afflict others, horror piled upon horror. They demand our attention, need our intervention, and yet there seems to be little that we can do beyond observe, perhaps protest, perhaps engage at a distance.

The author of Psalm 94 seems at first to mimic this situation. He calls on God to intervene, and consoles himself with the certainty from the teachings of his tradition that God knows, God has it all in hand, God will sort it out. But suddenly everything changes. The 'they' who are victims in the first part of the psalm, become suddenly 'lee', me myself. *Mee yakum lee*, 'who will rise up for me against those who do evil'? Gone is the detachment, the sense of security, the comfort in the promises of tradition, all certainties are shattered. Mine is the life that is threatened. Now it is only the direct experience of God that can support him: 'If God had not helped me, my soul would have been reduced to silence' (v 17). May we never experience again on this continent the horrors of the last century, and may we live to see the end of those that at every moment fill our minds and haunt our days.

These psalms are a record composed by those who experienced all the same vicissitudes of life that confront us today. They tried to understand them and to relate them to their experience of God. The psalmists may not know more than we do, but they have given us images and a language with which to explore our place in the world and our own response to the challenges that we face.

So let us return to Psalm 90 and the riddle with which it begins: how to bring the distant God of eternity, into the world of the everyday. The psalmist offers his own solution, once again exploring the mystery of time. But now he is no longer concerned with measuring its quantity, a thousand years or seventy, but instead its quality. The request is addressed to God, this time to '*Adonai*', to help us learn how to face the complexities, frustrations, responsibilities and hopes that each of us knows. *Limnot yameinu kein hoda v'navee l'vav hochmah*. Teach us how to measure our days, that we may obtain a heart of wisdom.