

Sermon 2 May 2021

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 44, which we heard some of sung beautifully just now, is described as a national lament and a prayer for help.

It is one of the many psalms in the psalter that come from the Korahites, the sons of Korah. But who was Korah and why were they lamenting? Well - I discovered that Korah was a cousin of Moses and that his people, the Korahites, had a special role guarding the tent where the Ark of the covenant was kept and where the Levites, the priests, did their business. But they came to begrudge this role which they perceived as being rather second-class and Korah, and 250 of his men, led a revolt against Moses. However, it just didn't work out and the Lord was less than impressed. So much so that he made the ground open up and all of them were swallowed up. No wonder that the Korahites, the sons of Korah (and there is, I found out, an Australian Christian band of that name too) were lamenting.

But these words:

Because of you we have been killed all day long and are counted as sheep to the slaughter.

...

Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust;

Our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up, come to help.

...

Are just as appropriate now at this time of global pandemic and, perhaps, thinking particularly of the daily tragedy that is unfolding in India and the recent calamity in Israel,, as they were 15 centuries ago.

I suppose that there are often times that many of us feel like this; that God has hidden his face at times of great suffering, and so we plead to him to come to our help.

I am a clinical psychologist and I have spent the majority of my career working with military personnel, veterans and, more recently, with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

I am quite sure that many of the survivors of the Lord's wrath went on to develop what we now describe as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD and we know that the Korahites lived on and, indeed, pursued an important role within the ancient Jewish community as doorkeepers.

But the words that are used by the psalmist could just as well be used by those all over the world facing persecution, privation and torture.

And some 33 centuries later, sometime in the late first century A.D., the author of the epistle to the Hebrews (almost certainly not Paul, it is now believed) is trying to galvanise Christian men and women who are being persecuted, just as Christian women and men today all over the world are being persecuted, for their faith.

And it could all be terribly depressing, were it not for the verses at the beginning of chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Christians all over the world are not alone. We are, every one of us, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. But I suppose that we all have different ideas of what that cloud of witnesses may look like. What does yours look like, I wonder, and who is in yours? Perhaps let us take just a moment to reflect on this ...

Personally, I find the paintings of Stanley Spencer incredibly useful here. He enlisted as a medical orderly in his mid 20s during the First World War and after a number of years in British military hospitals in this country was sent to the front line in Macedonia where he witnessed all sorts of horrors, later depicted in some of his paintings. Some of you may know of Spencer's work but, for those who don't, I am thinking particularly of Spencer's 'Resurrection' paintings. 'The resurrection of the soldiers', showing soldiers rising from the places where they fell on the battlefields of Macedonia, and the famous 'Resurrections at Cookham', where Spencer lived for most of his life, and at Port Glasgow, where 'ordinary' people are portrayed bursting from their graves.

And here, of course, in Marylebone, we have John Crompton's splendid apse frescoes, with Christ in majesty surrounded by his angels and the company of saints. What a visual aid.

So, therefore, and surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, looking to Christ and thinking of his sacrifice, we too here and at home, all of us, are called, along with military veterans, prisoners of war and all those refugees and asylum seekers, and others who have been persecuted for their faith, their colour, their creed, or any other belief or characteristic, all of us are called to run with perseverance the race that has been set before **us**, whether it be in the context of Covid, of illness, of fear, of worry, of anxiety or of any other adversity

for **we** believe in a God who can bring healing, health, wholeness and redemption.

Amen