

“A CRY FOR JUSTICE”

Date: August 19, 2007

Text: Psalm 146; Luke 4

John Calvin, founder of Presbyterianism, called the psalms “the anatomy of the soul.” Week after week this summer we have shared in the writings of people expressing their innermost feelings, sometimes of incredible joy and at other times expressing almost total despair or forsakenness. Through it all, there has been the resounding assurance that God always is with his people and that our God is One in whom we can trust.

It is on the level of comfort and support that people generally look to the psalms but there is another dimension that often is missed. I frequently am amazed as I read these marvelous “songs” how often the writer cries out for justice and righteousness. A case in point is Psalm 146.

This psalm, like many others, starts with a personal reflection on the goodness of the Almighty and calls us to remember all that God has done in our lives. He looks into his own life and considers what really counted when the chips were down. He realizes that princes of the earth could not sustain him. Even friends or family were not always able to help. Only the God of Jacob always has been there and thus he concludes that God alone deserves his complete trust.

Thus, the psalmist is filled with praise for the One who has been “there”, who still is “here” and always will be present. Have not many of you had that feeling in a hospital corridor or in a particular trying moment in your life? The last 5 psalms, 146-150, are called “hallelujah psalms,” a collection of praises that call us to proclaim God’s mighty goodness with trumpets and guitars and harps and all the sounds of the universe. Those who compiled these “songs” wanted to conclude on a triumphant note such as at the end of the “Overture 1812” when fireworks go off. In my opinion, these psalms provide a rationale for jazz services, dance and contemporary songs in worship so long as they are theologically and musically sound and fit the context provided by scripture.

The praise of Psalm 146, however, does not end on this high note of trumpets blaring. The psalmist’s praise marches him out the front door, into his car, down the highway, back in the world of Iraq, Monday at work, getting along with people. Listen to the conclusion of the psalm once again.

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob
Who made heaven and earth
Who executes justice for the oppressed
Who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free;
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down...
The Lord watches over strangers
He upholds the widow and orphans.*

Can you see why I say that the psalms, along with providing comfort and strength, lift up a vision calling for justice and righteousness?

I hope that one important by-product of the two years we have shared together in ministry is a growing recognition that a concern for the oppressed and those suffering from injustice has to be part of our religious commitment. That doesn’t mean we all will agree on what needs to be done or that the bumper stickers on our cars meet with your approval. It does mean that we are willing to struggle with the difficult issues of war, poverty and racism without walking out. And to have that discussion not as “politics” but “IN THE NAME OF CHRIST!”

I think it was Archbishop Romero of El Salvador who was murdered because of his continuing support of the oppressed in his country who said in a rough quote,

“When I give people food they call me a saint. When I ask why the people are hungry they call me a communist.”

All that this church and many others do to collect food and distribute it to the food cupboards is wonderful but should we not be asking what can be done systemically to stem the tide of the growing number of people who fall beneath the poverty line or have no health care coverage?

Note how important the cry for justice was in Jesus' ministry. He picked up on this theme when he first stood up to address the congregation in his hometown. Indeed what he read sounds like a litany for a truly prophetic ministry coming right out of Psalm 146 as well as the prophet Isaiah.

- **Justice for the oppressed.** Immediately we think of the immigration situation facing the migrants of this area.
- **Provide food for the hungry** and we ask why more can't be done to eliminate hunger in the wealthiest country in the world.
- **Set the prisoner free.** As some of you know, I have developed a relationship with a young man from Pakistan who is in the Batavia detention center. Would not Jesus be concerned for those stuck there? And would he not ask us why we have more people in prison than almost any other country in the world and why most of them are from minority backgrounds?
- **Uphold the children and widows.** I could tell you numerous stories about the struggles of single parents or senior citizens trying to live on Social Security. And again the question, can we not do better?

Not easy questions and I certainly don't have many answers but I believe deeply that it is part of the ministry of Christ's Church to address these matters. Indeed, if the so-called business of "saving souls" only involves personal salvation have we not negated an important part of the Biblical challenge of what it means to be God's people in God's world?

One time in a combat zone, maybe some place as hot and barren as Iraq, a soldier was surprised to find a religious worker standing next to him. The soldier said in astonishment, "What are you doing in this God-forsaken place?" The reply: "God hasn't forsaken this place so how can we?"

It isn't easy to live as Christ's people out in the world. Our fears about certain kinds of people, our stereotypes, and our self-centeredness get in the way. But if God already is in all "the God-forsaken places of the world" can His Church do anything else than stand with those in need?

Our lives, our actions, as we proclaim week after week, are based on the amazing love that God has shown in Jesus the Christ. Surely that love, as the psalm reminds us, needs to be shared with "the stranger, the widow, the children, the prisoners, those oppressed." Or in the words of our last hymn:

"O for a world where everyone respects each other's ways,
Where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise."

Not easy. Perhaps even scary. But what an exciting challenge. Surely the Living Christ is calling us to join him "out there!"