

**“GOD IS WITH US”**

*Psalm 46*

Natural disasters – drought, mudslides, tsunamis, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes (most recently and vividly in Turkey). The natural world seems capable of destruction on a vast scale – sometimes astonishingly rapidly, sometimes excruciatingly slowly. Where is God?

National disasters – perhaps more within the responsibility of human beings, but still affecting the wider population even if it's only a few who really carry the can – military coups, torture, persecution, revolution, rioting, the debt crisis. Where is God?

International disasters – again, engineered purposely or unwittingly by humans but drawing millions into fear and flight – wars, ethnic cleansing, desolation, mistrust. Where is God?

Maybe those examples are too wide-ranging for you. Perhaps you are more concerned with the detail, with the circumstances of your own personal life or the lives of those close to you. The issues that are affecting you are not a devastated area of Turkey or a bankrupt government in Greece or continuing violence and guerrilla warfare in East Africa. For you it's redundancy, injury, financial struggles, illness, despair. But you still ask the same question: where is God?

That's why we have just read *Psalm 46*. It's probably quite a familiar Psalm to many of us. We've heard it many times before. We have sung it. We read it – as we do much of Scripture – without letting its words touch us too deeply. But it is, as Kenneth Slack, first Moderator of the United Reformed Church, once wrote, “*emphatically no cosy piece of religious escapism*”. It's written by a person who knew calamity, who lived in constant fear of what might happen. In the fragile world of Middle Eastern politics there was always the threat of war, of exile, of slavery, of death. And in a world that was still as vulnerable to natural catastrophe as ours is today, there was the looming spectre of natural disaster, as described in the vv2,3. But for the writers and singers of that time, the greater fear was that chaos would suddenly overtake creation, the ordered world of God's design would slide back into the formless, empty darkness (*Genesis 1:2*) that existed before God fashioned a world of beauty and security out of it.

No doubt, in the back of his mind – and in the back of the minds of the people who would first have heard this song sung – there was the same question that we have asked: where is God? Indeed, that question was not confined to the back of the minds of his contemporaries: it was voiced by them in prayer and in protest as it had been for generations before and has been in every generation since. Things are going wrong. Where is God?

But the Psalmist doesn't articulate that question. He answers it. And he repeats that answer. He stresses what he believes to be the truth of that answer. Where is God? "*The LORD Almighty is with us.*" It's there in vv7,14 and could just as easily have been added after v3, as a kind of refrain before the little word "*Selah*". And it's not simply a Patience Strong kind of encouragement, a word to put on an inspirational calendar or inside a pretty greetings card, a word that is detached from the reality of everyday life. This is a cry of defiance and a statement of trust from the lips of someone who had known fear and anxiety. Many scholars think that this Psalm was written after an attack by a foreign power had been averted, an attack which would have seen God's people almost destroyed. But God was there with them in that.

It's interesting that the first statement is "*We will not fear*" – there's a powerful sense of trust there, especially as the song continues "*even though the earth give way ...*" Whatever happens, we need not fear because God is there, "*The LORD Almighty is with us*". Another writer, commenting on this Psalm, says that this is "*the central truth of Judaism and Christianity alike – 'Immanuel', God is with us*" (R E O White). In the storm, in the revolution, in our pain, in our anxiety, God is with us. He is there.

You see, this God whom we serve and in whom we say we trust is not a remote God, a *deus ex machina* as the ancients put it. He is not a "God outside the machine", the God of the Deists who has created the world then sits outside it watching, a remote God who leaves us to it. Nor is he the God who every now and then tinkers with creation in order to give an easy ride to those who pray hardest and most often. This is God who is in the thick of it with his beloved creatures, a God who wants to be involved, a God who shares our pain and stands alongside us when we just can't see where it's all going to end. The Psalmist writes, "*The LORD Almighty is with us.*" He is amongst **us**. He moves among his people. We are all in this together, and God is with us too – the God who sees the bigger picture, who knows where it's all going and who knows that, ultimately, it will be alright. That is a reason for encouragement. We can encourage one another with these words. Don't forget: God is here with us.

In fact, so eager is God to be with us in the ups and downs of this weird and unpredictable world that he actually physically joined us. Not content to sit remotely at a distance, watching and waiting to see how we cope, God came into our world in the person of his Son, Jesus, and experienced the fear, the pain, the suffering of fallen humanity. Remember the prayer we used earlier? The second paragraph (it's on the front of your order of service) reads: "*As if it were not enough to watch the world you had created, to admire your handiwork from eternity, as if it were not enough to care and be kind at a distance, you sent your Son to be flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, to live and walk beside us.*"

It's not easy to hang on to that, though, is it? When the results have come back from the consultant, when the bank manager finally pulls the plug, when the Personnel Manager tries to explain that it's nothing

personal but the firm has to make cuts somewhere, when your nearest and dearest are struggling with issues that you are helpless to deal with – at those times it seems almost impossible to believe that God is even remotely interested. But it's then that we have to summon up those reserves of trust and say "*Even though this is happening, we will not fear*".

In the midst of it all, there is advice from the Psalmist – advice in one of those phrases that we use so casually and so frequently that it's lost all meaning for many of us. Look at v10 – "*Be still and know that I am God.*" We'll sing those words a bit later, and we'll probably be thinking of them in the usual way – it's all about being quiet in a busy world, about being contemplative and reflective, an expression of earnest intensity on our faces as we try to give the impression that we're concentrating on God. But that's not the context of this phrase here. It's not an exhortation to go out in the garden and watch the stars or to sit quietly in the chair and muse on a favourite verse. As Derek Kidner writes, this is not "*a comfort for the harassed* [although it can well be], *but a rebuke to a restless and turbulent world.*" What the writer is saying here is that we need to stop and remind ourselves that "*The LORD Almighty is with us.*" That might sometimes take a huge act of will. It may need the encouragement of others to believe it. It may mean that we have to pray like we've never prayed before. It may mean that we are totally at the end of our tether and we have to cry out not just to God but to others to uphold us and support us.

It doesn't mean that we try to ignore what's going on or try to wish it all away or try to fix our attention on something else in the hope that the situation will have changed when we look back. It means we recognise that God is with us, standing by us and holding us in his firm embrace. It means that, even though we are beset with problems and troubles, with the pain and distress that can be so much a part of our broken humanness, we have that deep, deep awareness that we are held by an eternal God who "*will be exalted in the earth*". Look what he has already done. Look at what he done for others. Look at what he done for you in other circumstances. "*Come, see the works of the LORD*" – look at the evidence. He's done it before: he can do it again.

And that should make a noticeable difference in our lives. This isn't simply a panacea for those having a hard time. This is part of our mission as God's people, as those who believe that God sent his Son into our world to make a difference, as those who can be still and **know** that this is God. It's that serenity, that faith, that amazing attitude of trust that speaks to others of a God who is with us, alive and involved. It's the kind of faith that this Psalmist had, the kind of faith that was demonstrated by the three young men thrown into the blazing furnace prepared by Nebuchadnezzar saying "Even if we die, we die knowing God is with us." And it's that kind of faith that is needed to be shown in today's world. I've just read a book by Eugene Peterson entitled *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction* and it contained this sentence which has lodged itself in my mind: "*The proper work for the Christian is witness not apology.*" We'd

like to have all the answers, to demonstrate to people with wise words and clever arguments the existence of God and the truth of the gospel – the branch of evangelism we call apologetics. It would be great to be clever enough and quick-thinking enough to do that. But that’s not what God calls us to. He calls us to live out the reality of our faith in the circumstances of our everyday existence. He calls us to be people who live our lives knowing that God is with us and that that makes a difference to us.

Hear the rebuke of God as you rush around trying to sort out your problems – “*Be still and know that I am God.*” And receive the promise that he makes, a promise that has been sealed through the suffering, death and resurrection of his Son: “*The LORD Almighty is with us.*” May we believe it and live like it!