

Hannover International Worship, 17 April 2005

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Psalm 91:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
Will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

He will save you from the fowler's snare
And from the deadly pestilence;

He will cover you with his feathers
And under his wings will you find refuge;

You will not fear the terror of the night
Nor the arrow that flies by day;

A thousand may fall at your side,
Ten thousand at your right hand
But it will not come near you.

The 91st Psalm that we read at the beginning of this service; together with the 23rd Psalm, which the choir will sing at the end, is one of the great psalms of confidence and trust in the Lord.

I imagine that both are familiar texts to many of you; but surprisingly, perhaps, this 91st Psalm is a text that I first discovered – or perhaps I should say, a text that first found its way to me – in a German language and not an English language context, even though it was long before I came to Germany. Indeed, I was still at school at the time. Among the books that I had to read in preparation for my German Advanced Level, or “A” level, examination was a collection of German short stories from the period 1945 to 1955. It will be no surprise that most of the stories dealt with wartime experiences or with the hopelessness of the immediate post-war period – which for me, incidentally, was an important step in arriving at an understanding of what Germans too had suffered in the aftermath of the Nazi dictatorship. Among these stories was one by Elisabeth Langgässer called “Der Erstkommunionstag”, the Day of the First Communion,

set in the closing phase of the war. The little girl, Angela, is, as one observer says, “one of the children being brought to First Communion quickly, before we are all lost. Who knows whether any of us will see tomorrow, or even tonight?” Angela is fully aware of the solemnity of the event, and speaks of the moment when she will “receive the Saviour”, as the narrator tells us, “with all the childish simplicity of her meagre seven years”; but the really important thing is the cake her mother has baked for the occasion, “eine Gittertorte”, as Angela proudly and excitedly tells the priest, and it was not clear to us at school then, and it still isn’t clear to me even today, exactly what kind of cake or tart that is. At any rate, even though her mother had to use cod liver oil to bake it with, it is covered with red cherry jam which Angela dips her finger into, and her happiness, even among the anxieties of the adults that she senses without really understanding them, is complete. Then comes the air-raid warning, and the family take refuge in the cellar. Angela suddenly realises they have left the Gittertorte behind in the kitchen. What if a bomb falls on it? – The explosions come closer, they hear the crashing masonry, the air in the cellar fills with dust and with the deafening drone of the aeroplanes. Together the family pray the 91st Psalm, which the narrator quotes in fragmentary form. “Fittichen ... schirmt er dich... und unter seinen Flügeln ... nicht brauchst du dich zu fürchten...” - It was the first time any of us in my German class had come across the word „Fittich”, and even with the dictionary it took me some time to sort it out, because I assumed that “Fittichen” was a diminutive with the “-chen” ending, and couldn’t work out what of; another reason why the story, and the scene, stuck in my mind. – Then the air raid is past, the neighbours come round: “Are you still alive down there? The top floor has collapsed...” – They help little Angela up out of the cellar, and by the light of the moon and the fires blazing outside, she sees her Gittertorte still standing on the kitchen table. “We only need to blow the dust off it...”

It's a charming story. But what are we to make of it, from a Christian point of view?

Little Angela sees her precious cake by the light of the firestorm blazing outside. "A thousand may fall at your side, but it will not come near you"; and we may assume that that same bombing raid claimed its hundreds, if not thousands, of victims. More than likely, there were others among them who had also sat in their cellars and air-raid shelters, also praying the 91st Psalm. And no doubt there were among them other Angelas, other innocent children; perhaps even others who had also just taken their first Communion, who still had the sweet taste of the wafer upon their tongues: and yet they were among the thousand who fell, the ten thousand at our right hand.

This is an example from literature, but we need not look far for examples from real life. For some reason that I cannot really explain, the imagery of this psalm – the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day – has always been associated in my mind with images from films of the First World War, the soldiers climbing out of the trenches, going "over the top", as the saying is, into the hail of machine-gun fire that mowed them down. Can we believe that among these men, there were on the one hand those who put their trust in God, that these were the ones who came through, because, as our psalm says, "if you make the Most High your dwelling, the Lord who is my refuge, then no harm will befall you", so that He commanded his angels to guard them in all their ways, to lift them up in their hands, so that they do not strike their foot against a stone; while on the other hand there were those who did not "say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust" – and who were therefore among the thousands who fell at our side, those whom the angels did not lift up on their hands, so that they were dashed against the stones?

Closer at hand is the tsunami disaster, the pictures of which are still so vividly before our eyes. As the great wave rolled over the land, a whole train was washed away, I believe everybody on board perished. In other places, no

doubt you will have read or heard of the miraculous escapes, the amazing chances, the good luck, by which people here and there survived when all around them were swept away: stories and scenes reminiscent of the apocalyptic images with which Jesus foretells the coming of the Son of Man [Matt. 24, 40-41]: Two men will be in the field; one is taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and the other left.”

But things get really difficult if we turn our attention to a further verse of Psalm 91 that is not among those I quoted at the beginning of my sermon.

“A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,
But it will not come near you;
You will only observe with your eyes
And see the punishment of the wicked.”

Is that it, then? It is the “good”; it is, in the parlance of the Old Testament, the “righteous”, those who trust in the Lord, those who “love me and acknowledge my name” (v. 14), whom the Lord will deliver, who will be safe under his wings, while the bad, the wicked, will not enjoy that protection, but will fall victim to the “arrow that flies by day” and the “pestilence that stalks in darkness” – is it?

There have of course always been those who say yes, it is. We are all familiar with the conviction, which no doubt existed long before Max Weber made the association between Calvinism and the rise of capitalism, and which can certainly be found not only among orthodox Calvinists but also in many fundamentalist elements of the Christian church today, that God’s favour, God’s reward for those who serve him most faithfully, will not only be bestowed in the life to come, but is reflected in earthly good fortune and prosperity in the here and now. The corollary to this would then be that those who suffer misfortune, those who fall victim in this world must have displeased the Almighty, and if it is not apparent to the world around them how they have done so, if they appear to have led what in everyday terms we call a decent life, or even a worthy, a

blameless, a holy life, then this only goes to prove how differently God, who sees the secrets of our hearts, judges from the way we judge on external appearances.

There are certainly plenty more people who, even if they do not adhere to any fundamentalist group, even if they belong to the mainstream of our Laodicean, lukewarm church, and even if they would never admit, or never consciously admit to themselves, that they think in such a way, nevertheless act or react to life and events as if they did. We all know the attitude that starts as “It can’t happen to me,” and which, when it does happen, turns into “Why me?” There is something particularly tragic about people who, after living in faith for many years, find that faith shaken or shattered by some event to which they fall victim, whether it is bereavement, illness or other disaster. The outside observer may feel like asking whether such people have been living with their eyes closed. How could they have failed to see that death and disaster strike at random? Could they really have believed that they had a special compact with God, which as a reward for their faith would keep them safe from all the misfortunes of our world? Did they really see themselves as so much better than everyone else, or, if that sounds too much like justification by works for protestant ears, as so much more faithful believers than everyone else, that they had earned such a reward?

There is, of course, all the difference in the world between such a weighing up by an uninvolved observer and the sentiments of the person facing the real experience. No-one who has not been challenged by personal suffering ought to be confident about how they would cope with it if it happened to them. I myself stand at a climacteric point in my life: in the coming week I shall be celebrating my 60th birthday. Looking back over my own life, I do indeed have every cause to be thankful to God; I can indeed say with the 23rd Psalm that loving-kindness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life. To quote another psalm, my lot has fallen in a good ground. I have lived 60 years on this

earth without having suffered anything that can be regarded as a major misfortune, serious illness or material loss. I hope, however, that I am neither so arrogant nor so conceited as to feel that I have done anything to deserve it, or that my poor faith and poor works in any way entitle me, as it were, to special terms from God. I try to bear in mind that it could all change tomorrow; and I have to admit that if it did, I am far from being sure of how well my faith would hold up.

I am put in mind of C. S. Lewis, well known in the English-speaking world as a Christian apologist. As he is not so well known in Germany, relatively few people went to see the film “Shadowlands”, in which Lewis is played by Anthony Hopkins, which is a great pity as it’s a marvellous film. The film shows how Lewis, well used to being lionised by the middle-class ladies who flock to lectures in which he describes pain as “God’s megaphone to rouse a sleeping world”, finds his faith deeply challenged when Joy Davidson, the woman he has hardly realised he is in love with, is struck down by bone cancer. “I’ve come up against some real experience,” he declares, “and it’s a hard master”.

In pursuing these questions, I turn to the passage from St. Luke that was read as the Gospel this morning. “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?” Jesus asks. “Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you no.” So people do not become victims of violence, do not suffer accidents, and equally are not killed by natural disasters or contract fatal diseases, because they are worse people than others. The corollary, of course, is that neither are those people who do not fall victim to accident or disaster better people than those who are. “All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God”, says St. Paul.

The question as to why, in that case, some suffer and others do not is one that it is beyond my wit to answer. I read in a newspaper that the tsunami disaster had sparked a theological debate on the subject “Where was God when the tsunami struck?”: however, the newspaper concerned apparently did not consider the question interesting enough to report the content of the debate, which is perhaps fortunate for you as I might otherwise spend the next hour telling you about it.

To Jesus’ added comment, or threat, “unless you repent you will all likewise perish”, I shall return in a minute.

In Oscar Wilde’s comedy “The Importance of Being Earnest”, the ironic paradoxes of which reveal so many illuminating truths about human nature, the governess Miss Prism says of the novel she once wrote, “The good ended happily and the bad unhappily; that is what Fiction means”. And Fiction is, of course, pure invention; our experience of the world tells us that in reality, things are quite different.

But romantic novels are not the only form of literature in which “the good end happily and the bad end unhappily”. It is also the case in fairy tales. Indeed, in fairy tales it is absolutely essential; a fairy tale in which good does not triumph and evil is not punished in the end is quite unthinkable. The fact that the law of fairyland in this respect is so distant from our everyday experience is, I suppose, one of the reasons why, in the course of that era of human development that I will call the Age of Sophistication, fairy stories came to be regarded as suitable only for children – and in some cases, indeed, not even for them. More recently there has been a new recognition of the profound way in which fairy stories are rooted in the depths of the human psyche. Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of “The Lord of the Rings”, was, as his own books amply demonstrate, an expert not only on language but also on mythology and fairy tales; and Tolkien, himself a committed Christian, was deeply aware of the religious content of such stories. In his essay “On Fairy Stories”, published in 1947, he

speaks of “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” for which he invents the word “eucatastrophe”, the “good catastrophe” or “turn for the good”, “the sudden joyous turn, which denies (in the face of much evidence) universal defeat, and insofar is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world – a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth”.

Evangelium, gospel, good news: the news of an underlying reality or truth denying universal defeat: it is from this point of view that I return to our 91st and 23rd Psalms. The 91st Psalm is a prophetic text; and a prophet is not simply a fortune teller, a crystal ball gazer who sees what is coming in the future; a prophet is one who tells God’s truth, truth that will one day be made manifest, however much it may appear to be contradicted by the sordid realities of the world around us. Why is it that the 23rd Psalm is so often said and sung at funerals? “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for thou art with me.” “Loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” This appears to be saying that God will guard us safely through all the dangerous situations of life, and we can all expect to live to a ripe old age. But if we really thought it meant that, how could we bring ourselves to say or sing these words, not only at thanksgiving services and golden weddings or golden confirmations, and not only at the funerals of those who have indeed lived to a ripe old age, but also at the funeral of the young road accident victim, of the young woman who has died of breast cancer, of the murdered child?

Surely we can do so only if our faith embraces the concept that beyond the tribulations that accompany our lives there is an underlying reality or truth that denies, in the face of much evidence, universal defeat. In view of much evidence, we may well find it impossible to read the 91st Psalm as meaning that nothing can happen to us if we put our trust in God. But we can read it as saying, in the face of much evidence, that whatever happens to us, in the underlying reality and truth nothing can happen to us. If Christ has overcome death, death has no finality; death is not the worst thing that can happen. Neither death nor

life can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

So what remains of the distinction the psalm makes between “the righteous” and “the wicked”? What of Jesus’ comment that unless we repent, we will all perish like those upon whom the tower fell? The thing that sets us believers apart from the others in this respect is that through our faith we have the knowledge, we have the glimpse of that other underlying truth, which allows us to feel secure in the shelter of the Most High and to rest in the shadow of the Almighty. The repentance that Jesus demands will then consist not so much in stopping doing wrong and starting to do right, but rather in turning to God and opening ourselves to him to such an extent that we are able to attain to that knowledge that we are safe in his everlasting arms. But that turning is demanded of us; we do not know how many more years the owner of the vineyard will allow us, in which to bear fruit; or before the tower falls upon us, or the tsunami comes.

As I approach the age of 60, I can indeed give thanks to God for the loving-kindness and mercy that have followed me all the days of my life. I do not claim to have deserved it; I have certainly not deserved it more than others to whom it has not been granted. Looking forward, of course I hope and pray that this may continue: but I also pray that, even if I see the tower falling upon me, or even if I find myself struck down by the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, I may still, in the words of the Psalm, say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust”; or, in the words of the hymn that now follows:

“Through all the changing scenes of life,
In trouble or in joy,
The praises of my God shall still
My heart and tongue employ.”

Amen.