

## Psalm 46

<sup>1</sup> *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

<sup>2</sup> *Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,*

<sup>3</sup> *though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*

<sup>4</sup> *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.*

<sup>5</sup> *God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.*

<sup>6</sup> *The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.*

<sup>7</sup> *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

<sup>8</sup> *Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth.*

<sup>9</sup> *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.*

<sup>10</sup> *“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”*

<sup>11</sup> *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

This is a psalm for times of trouble and turmoil in the natural world, creating global instability, the upheaval of what was assumed to be solid and fixed, and the threat of disaster (v.1-3). It's a psalm for times of panic, aggressive self-interest, fear and anger in human society, when structures and institutions and governments totter (v.6-9). It's a psalm addressed to God's people (v.1,4,11), bringing both reassurance and direction. How might it guide us in a time of global pandemic and pan-panic?

Of course, action is required at such times – there are things we must 'do'; but first of all, it is important to 'be' and to 'know': *Be still and know that I am God* (v.10). This being and knowing will shape our doing.

### What to know

The most important thing to know is that God is, and always will be, *the Most High* (v.4), *the Lord of hosts* (v.11), *exalted among the nations ... exalted in the earth* (v.10). God is not remote from the *desolations* that afflict the earth, nor the *wars* that afflict the earth's peoples. His active involvement in and behind these far exceeds our limited human ability to fathom, but this psalm echoes the wider biblical understanding that God's involvement expresses aspects of judgment and mercy, as God brings desolations and makes wars cease.

Past experience suggests that some people will interpret a pandemic as divine retribution for the sins of whichever particular group they regard as most deserving it; others will look for

scapegoats to blame. Both responses are probably unhealthy projections of one's own fear and anger. By contrast, when Jesus responded to those who wondered about the suffering and death arising from either human wrongdoing or natural causes, he directed them away from questions of relative deserving, and towards the greater peril of estrangement from God (Luke 13:1-5) and the opportunity for God to work for good (John 9:1-3).

The disordering (and often self-inflicted) effects on nature and society of human alienation from God are everywhere on display in our world, and it is a great comfort to think that God will eventually right all wrongs, removing all evil and suffering in a renewed creation (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21). But the dark side of that bright hope is that those who refuse God's mercy and goodness, whatever course they follow instead, are binding themselves in one way or another to the wrongs that need to be dealt with, whatever good they may achieve in the meantime.

Jesus predicted *wars and tumults ... famines and pestilences ... distress of nations in perplexity ... people fainting with fear and foreboding* (Luke 21) until his return at the end of history – a time of relief and redemption for God's people but of distress and destruction for others; the 'day of the Lord' in which everything is put right with perfect justice and mercy; the passing away of everything incompatible with the goodness of God in the renewal of creation.

Pandemics do unmistakably underline the disordered state of our world, natural and human, and the eventual consequences of defying our Creator. They alert us to a coming day of reckoning and ultimate righting of wrongs. If God is so intimately involved in his creation that not even a sparrow *will fall to the ground apart from your Father* (Matthew 10:29), doubtless he is no less involved in the more seismic and consequential events of our planet and societies, and some of that involvement may bear the character of judgment or of mercy.

But rather than playing God by trying to over-interpret the details or assume the role of judge ourselves, we do better to recall that God largely delays whatever judgment we deserve in order that we might turn towards him in repentance, since his desire is that no-one should perish (2 Peter 3:9). As Jesus indicated, such circumstances call for sober self-assessment and turning towards God ourselves, and a seeking openness to whatever good God might bring about. The whole thrust of the Christian gospel is that God reaches out in love to a sinful, broken and suffering world, and calls his people to do likewise.

But the God whom Psalm 46 invites us to know is not just involved in an overall way in all that happens in our world, and with an eye to the ultimate future; this God is involved in an intimate and personal way with his own people, with a focus on the here and now. God's people can say that God is *with us* (v.7,11) ... *very present* (v.1) ... *in the midst of us* (v.5); he lives with us (*his holy habitation*, v.4). And he is present as *our refuge and strength ... giving help in trouble* (v.1); he is our *fortress* (v.7,11).

The *city of God* in this Psalm refers first of all to Jerusalem. The stream from the Gihon spring ensured its water supply (v.4); its fortifications made it a fortress; but above all the temple where God made his presence known in a special way (v.4) was what really guaranteed the

city's provision and protection (v.7,11). Forces might come against the city, trouble might beset the people, but *God will help ... when morning dawns* (v.5) – that is, at the time of conflict, the time when rescue comes.

The last verses of the psalm itself widen the context well beyond Jerusalem; and in the New Testament, the physical city becomes a symbol of the spiritual community of Jesus's followers. We can, therefore, take to ourselves the reassurance of this psalm that God is *our* refuge, strength, help, provider, protector; that he is very present, with us, among us in our own times of trouble and upheaval.

There were times in the past when fortress Jerusalem was under siege, militarily or politically isolated; and there have been times when the spiritual community of God's people have been under siege physically or culturally. Historically, we are no strangers to imposed isolation. It has always mattered more than anything that, in such circumstances, we know that God is with us – and, more than that, to know in intimate relationship the God who is with us. He is the underlying source of life-sustaining provision that brings gladness in times of trouble. He is the stabilising source of strength and security when we are under threat.

If we are required in times of pandemic to self-isolate, or if we have imposed upon us other restrictions to movement, association, travel, work, or whatever, it still matters more than anything that we know that God is with us, and that we know the God who is with us... that *we know that I am God* (v.10).

### **How to be**

It is this knowing of God that makes possible the primary response to *be still* (v.10). This is not the stillness of paralysed fear, denial, selfish withdrawal, uninvolved piety, passive inertia, or gloomy resignation. It is the stillness of calm confidence in God. There is no need to panic, because *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble* (v.1). As a result, *we will not fear though the earth gives way* (v.2). *Even though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea... we shall not be moved* (v.2, 5).

To an ancient Israelite, the roaring and foaming sea waters (v.2-3) symbolised forces of chaos, something unpredictable and out of control and potentially destructive. In times of chaos, it is easy to be afraid and to react in panic. In times like ours of globalisation, instant communications and information overload, we can feel pressured to react without careful reflection, to be influenced by moods and messages shaped by lurid headlines and unreliable soundbites which go 'viral' more quickly than a virus. In an age when we have learned to mistrust politicians and institutions, and at a time when everyone is suddenly required to cope with multiple new challenges and unknown outcomes, it is as understandable as it is unhelpful that some people respond to confusion and uncertainty by trying at least to look after themselves and those around them, even if this leads to hoarding resources that leaves others short.

Being still in the presence of God not only centres our trust and hope in God, it also makes more likely that we will hear God's *voice* amid the raging and tottering (v.6), and so better

discern how to act appropriately. It's about getting our bearings right, even if we can't see where the path ahead leads. The psalm shows what some of these bearings are. It takes on board the full reality of the trouble to be faced and its possible ramifications, including significant change in the natural and social order. It encourages a historical perspective, learning from how God has worked through such challenges before (v.8) and has brought good out of evil (v.9). It therefore helps us, as Jesus indicated (John 9:1-3), to look for ways that God might be at work for good. It reminds us to find our joy in God (v.4) rather than our circumstances (as the apostle Paul urged the Philippian church, also in a time of trouble), and our primary purpose in exalting God (v.10) – even if our investments take a tumble, our business fails or our health is at risk.

And there is nothing trite or easy about any of this. We may well have to wrestle through our fears and frustrations, even losses and griefs, and many practical difficulties and troubles towards holding firmly to these spiritual bearings. We might note in passing that it is the God of *Jacob* who is our refuge (v.7,11) – Jacob, a man God cared for through all manner of troubles, some of his own making, and who wrestled with God to reach a point of acceptance and dependence.

### **What to do**

In the light of all that the psalm encourages us to know and to be, it is interesting that it doesn't explicitly mention anything that we are to do! Some things, perhaps, are implicit. The *holy habitation of the Most High* (v.4) was represented especially by the temple in Jerusalem, a place Jesus said was intended as *a house of prayer for all the nations* (Mark 11:17). God's people were intended to live prayerful lives set apart for God in the midst of other nations, and thereby to draw those nations to God. We still are.

Prayer is not what we do when all else has failed or when we pause from action; it is the primary and chief thing we do when we believe that God is *in the midst* (v.5), at work (v.8) and so thoroughly *Lord* (v.7,8,11) that if he were to utter his voice, the earth would melt (v.6). There are, of course, many forms of prayer and most are appropriate in times of trouble, including praise, confession, petition, intercession, along with prayerful meditation on scripture, prayerful attentiveness to the signs of the times, waiting before God in silence, and fasting.

The formation of our lives and characters through such spiritual practices, and the setting of our bearings through biblically-shaped reflection, develop habits of character and patterns of behaviour that bear witness to others of the observable and significant difference it makes when our confidence is in God. Intentionally, but unselfconsciously, we may share what we have rather than hoard it, with particular concern for the most needy and vulnerable. We may speak words of hope and blessing, rather than fear and complaint, and encourage clarity and truth in communication. We may exhibit a peace, gladness or purpose in God that might influence others towards being still and coming to know God. Indeed, the words *Be still, and know that I am God* in the psalm (v.1) may well be addressed not only to God's people but to others also. Part of our mission at this time may be to embody and express this message.