

Following God (Psalm 25:1-10)

Today's reading from the old Testament is a Psalm of David, a prayer for guidance and deliverance, and by the time David wrote these words he had been a follower of God for many years – he had trusted the Lord – who he knew and loved – with his life and his future. But when he wrote this psalm, something had gone terribly wrong in his life. It's often thought that this psalm was written when David's own son, Absalom had rebelled against him. And that fits the facts we know, and also the tone of this psalm.

Absalom had been a favourite of David's and was also popular with the nation as a whole. We know that he was handsome, charming, and persuasive. But then there was some family trouble.

The term "family trouble" doesn't really cover the magnitude of what happened. I know we all have family trouble from time to time, but this family trouble was extreme: It started when Absalom's half-brother, Amnon, raped Absalom's sister Tamar.

In response, King David ignored what had happened. But as we know, ignoring family problems often doesn't help... and unlike his father, Absalom remembered his half-brother's crime, and two years later Absalom carried out a successful plan to avenge his sister, and Amnon was murdered.

But despite Amnon's crime, it wasn't justice: it was revenge – it was the outworking of Absalom's anger, and an escalation of the family troubles. So, to avoid punishment Absalom fled into exile, and it was three years before he was allowed to come back to Jerusalem, and two more years passed before he was allowed to speak to his father, David.

But in all of this Absalom grew more and more resentful – he could justify – to himself at least, if not to his father or anyone else, the murder of Amnon. And over time he began to resent his father more and more... and he convinced himself that he needed to avenge himself. He decided to rebel against his father, and using his charm and persuasion – all his political skill, he was able to gain such a following that King David himself was forced to flee Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:14).

But it didn't go well for Absalom: David raised an army against Absalom's followers, and the rebel army was utterly defeated in the forests of Ephraim. Twenty thousand men were killed in the first part of the battle (2 Sam 18:7), and many more died in the forest that day.

And one of the men who died in the battle was Absalom. He was riding on his mule when his hair was caught in the branches of a tree. Then, even though David had ordered Absalom to be taken alive, he was killed with three light spears through his heart. (2 Sam 18:14)

David's heart was broken.

What a horrible chain of events.

Was David at fault? Probably – he'd ignored the crime that started it all. Was Absalom? Yes – he took revenge rather than seeking justice. Was Amnon? Well, yes – his crime started it all.

And in the end, more than twenty thousand killed.

What a mess. Lust, pride, revenge, power, rivalry, war – it would make for a high-rating television series, I'm sure.

But it's hardly a unique story. Of course, many conflicts don't end with the death of 20,000 people in combat, but few conflicts end in peace. It was the story in ancient Israel, and we've seen such stories repeated time and time again throughout history. Lust, pride, revenge, power, rivalry, war. And as we look across the world today we still see it.

It is sad, but it's not surprising. Shortly before the first Easter, Jesus was with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and he told them "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines" (Mark 13:7-9a)

Conflicts exist in the world. Conflicts exist in our society. Conflicts exist in our families.

And as we learn and grow, we find that we can't make everything right... we can try – and we should try – and from time to time we can resolve problems... but it seems there's always more. Always more people to comfort, always more wounds to heal.

Hopefully, our family conflicts will never include rape or murder; and nor will they end in bloody battles... and we may not be betrayed by our families in the way that David was by Absalom...

But have you ever been betrayed by someone you loved. Or trusted. Have you been let down? Have you witnessed injustices unpunished?

God understands what we go through. In Paul's account of the last supper (1 Cor 11:23-24), he stresses Jesus' betrayal by one of his own disciples. "On the same night in which Jesus was betrayed by Judas, he took bread." Jesus surely understands the pain of being betrayed – he has been there – but he didn't seek revenge, instead he sought resolution – true and lasting – everlasting – peace.

Terrible things had happened to David, but he had learned to trust in God: if we go forward to verse 20 of today's psalm we read that David prayed again: "Oh, keep my soul, and deliver me; Let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You."

Thankfully, most people will never have to go through a horrible escalating tragedy like David did.

But rebellious children can break our hearts. And family troubles always bring heartache.

All of us will go through times of trouble.

How can we make it through? -- We must trust in God.

As David prays at the opening of this Psalm:

¹ In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.

² I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.

He doesn't trust in his position as King. He doesn't trust in the strength of his army. He doesn't trust in his own political skill, or his intelligence or his wisdom. Instead, he says "In you, Lord my God, I put my trust."

But David's trust in God isn't vague, it's not a blind faith. In verse 4 he says, "Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths."

It was not enough for David to say, "God will make it all work out for me". David knew that he needed to follow God's ways – he asked God to teach him his paths. And that's why we meet together here, why we read the scriptures and meditate on them – we all need to know God better, love him more, and more closely follow his ways.

And then David continues his prayer, "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long." (25:5).

David, of course, was not perfect. He was quite a sinner, and he bore the consequences of his past; he bore guilt for his own sins because he realized that at least part of his trouble was his own fault. Ultimately, all of the world's sorrows can be traced back to sin – people's rebellion against God – because we all try to live our lives our own ways, instead of God's ways.

And while much of our suffering isn't our own fault – it's someone else's, but at least some of the time, just as it was with David, it's our own fault, whether completely or partly.

David had lusted after Bathsheba, and he conspired to have Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed, so David could have her for himself.

In 2 Samuel (12:10), the Lord told David that his house would always bear the burden of his sin with Bathsheba. And through His prophet, Nathan, God told him: "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own."

We might think, "Well, I've never done anything like that." But every moment that we spend doing something wrong is a wasted moment when we could have been doing something good.

Every moment we spend not loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is a moment turning away from God.

Every moment we spend not loving our neighbours as ourselves is a moment in sin.

When King David wrote the words of this psalm, he wasn't just concerned about the treachery of his enemies: He was also concerned about his own transgressions. So in this Psalm, David mentioned his own sins three different times.

In verses 6&7, David cried out to God and said:

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good.

He says "Do not remember the sins of my youth" – forgive them.

David had trusted in God to save him. He knew that God could forgive him for all the wrongdoings of his life. By faith, he was looking ahead to the forgiveness that God would provide through the messiah.

It's easier for us today to have that trust – because we have the full story of salvation through Jesus the messiah. Jesus who, despite the miserable state of the world, came to put things right. Jesus who came to pay the price of our sins and the sins of the whole world through his death on the cross, and Jesus who rose from the dead and opened up the gates to everlasting life to all who turn to him.

David had the promise of the coming Messiah: but we have the proof!

John (1 John 1:8-9) tells us:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

But David doesn't just pray for forgiveness, he writes in verse 9 "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." (25:9).

As well as asking for forgiveness, David prays for God to lead him. Not to tell him what to do, but to lead him. So, in this, David becomes a follower of God.

And if you are a follower of God, verse 10 tells us that "All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant."

David had been a follower of God for years, but he was still in need of God's forgiveness and was still in need of God's guidance, back in verses 4 and 5 he prayed "Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long."

The scriptures describe the Christian life as a walk. In Romans (6:4) Paul tells us to "walk in newness of life." In 2 Corinthians (5:7) he says "we walk by faith, not by sight."

We need to ensure that we are walking the walk, and not simply talking the talk.

And we can do that by being like David, and like the faithful followers of God in all the ages. We need to, in all things, keep seeking the God's mercy and truth.

Keep seeking the truth of God's word. In church. In bible reading. In prayer. In fellowship with other Christians.

So, how has your walk been going lately?

Have you been walking in God's paths? Or drifting of to the side from time to time? Have you been staggering?

There's all sorts of distractions as we follow God, but whether our walk with him has been a crawl or a stagger, fast or slow, eager or tentative, we can be assured that the God he loves us so much, he was willing to give his only Son to die for us – and to rise again – to lead us through death into everlasting life.

How's your walk been going lately? How is your walk gong to be this week?

Amen