

## Because of Love

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 & Matthew 26:26-29

Maundy Thursday/20<sup>th</sup> March 2008

When Matthew tells us that Jesus left with his disciples for the Mount of Olives after they had “sung the hymn,” the hymn would have been Psalm 116. This is one of the four hymns sung after the Passover meal. It’s a marvelous psalm, a kind of thank-you note to God for God’s faithfulness and deliverance. This is also the only time in all of Scripture when an individual says directly, “I love the Lord.” We know of commandments to love the Lord and can point to affirmations of God’s steadfast love. But this is the only place where we hear someone state explicitly, “I love Yahweh.”

Why does the psalmist love Yahweh? Not because it’s expected of him as a kind of duty. He doesn’t have to, but wants to and can do no other. Why? It’s right there in the first verse, “Because he has heard my voice and my supplication. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.”

It’s a song sung by a people who know what it’s like to be enslaved and in exile, but also know that Yahweh is ever faithful.

It’s a song sung by a people who know what it’s like to be in distress and anguish, who know what it’s like to experience the pangs of death, who know what it feels like to be all the way to hell, and yet know that Yahweh will never give up on them.

It’s a song sung by people who cried out to God in deep despair and came to know that their words were not uttered in vain.

Why do they love the Lord, why do I love the Lord? Because he has heard my voice. Your voice, my voice, our voices: we have been heard. To be heard – *truly* heard by someone – is to be known by them. To be heard and therefore *known*, we regain a sense of ourselves, we know we exist, we know that we are. It’s truly one of the most profound of human experiences to bear your soul to another and be heard, for in the hearing we become more of ourselves, we connect with ourselves, we become *real*. This is especially important in times of trial, when we know that our suffering is real and not an illusion, that someone takes us seriously and doesn’t try to discount us by ignoring us, by not hearing us. To be *unheard* is to be *unknown* is to feel as if we don’t exist. Love requires a hearing. *Love always requires a hearing.*

All that we remember and relive this night and tomorrow is God making it very clear to us that in love we have been heard. God has heard and hears the cries of God’s people. God knows our plight. When we cry out in prayer it is not into the cold empty silence of an indifferent universe, but to One who listens, who knows us and in whom we are known, who validates our existence, because we matter. Everyone matters.

Why do I love the Lord? Because God is faithful. God’s covenant with Israel and with humanity stands forever. God’s promise to us is sure. God can be trusted.

Therefore, I will call on him as long as I live.... Even in times of trial, when the snares of death encompassed me and even hell itself tried to take my life, in my distress and anguish, I called out to God and God was gracious. What will I return to the LORD for all this bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

But what about the people who don't know that God is faithful, who cannot truly trust God with anything? What about the people who have difficulty believing the promises of God, because trust was betrayed or promises not kept? What about the people whose experience of life has been so terrible that they can't trust a single human being and, therefore, could never trust God and thus live consumed with anger or jealousy or fear. "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice..." the psalmist says. But I know a lot of people, and know you do, too, who can't say this with any integrity, because the hurt and pain and sorrow in their lives are immense.

I have to believe that when Jesus cried out on the cross, he was crying out for them too, crying out for us, humanity's representative, in getting a hearing from God. I have to believe that what we remember and share this evening, declare to the world – and remind ourselves – is that Jesus' suffering was precisely for people who are unable to say, "I love the Lord," because they haven't been heard, their suffering left unrecognized. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in *[him]* this night.<sup>1</sup>

I need to believe this and on good days I do. The good news Jesus Christ gives with his life is that even when everything is falling apart all around us, and the cries and anguished voices of the human heart speaking over each other into one earsplitting cacophony of broken, dissonant chords, even this cry will not go unheard. All the experiences of pain, poverty, cruelty, hunger, torture, war, oppression, destruction, violence in the human experience, the continued onslaught of evil trying to undo everything that God hopes for us and creation are all somehow answered in the cry made for us. My voice, your voice, our voice, the voices of the world are included in his voice that cries, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" On Easter morning, we will know that in love, because of love, his voice – and through him, our voices – have been heard.

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<sup>1</sup> Modification of Philips Brooks' (1835-1893) text of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (1868).