The Psalms
Psalm 130 Out of the deep

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Psalm 130   *Luke 15: 11–20*

Illustrations:
Philip Evergood, *Dance Marathon*, 1934
Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Prodigal Son among the Swine*, c.1650
Ground Zero 9/11 Memorial – *Reflecting Absence*

The September 11th Memorial in New York marks the absence of the Twin Towers destroyed in a terrorist attack in 2001 by siting two voids on the footprints of those two lost towers. These two vast and cavernous spaces (200ft by 200ft and 35ft deep), are surrounded by dark polished walls of granite, on the lip of which are inscribed the names of the nearly 3000 dead. Down those walls, water flows into pools. And from behind these walls one hears and sees the water falling in thin veils into the pools, at the centre of which there is a hole, into which the waters disappear, vanishing into nothingness as far as the viewer can tell.

The architects called their design 'Reflecting Absence', but it might also have been called 'Out of the Deep', since the monument amounts to a visual, 3-dimensional representation of the stark place from which Psalm 130 begins – 'Out of the depths have I called to thee O Lord'. For the Psalms in general, the depths are the depths of the sea, and the depths of the sea are a figure for imperilment and death. In this particular Psalm, it is from the depths of profound danger and despair that the Psalmist calls out to God – and the two pools simply but, given their scale, very dramatically, represent the unfathomable depths of despair caused by arbitrary and untimely death; and the waterfalls running down their sides, represent the seemingly unstanchable waterfalls of tears with which the bereaved water the earth, as their cries go heavenwards.

Generations of readers, Christian, Jewish and neither of the above, have identified with and borrowed this stark image – so Oscar Wilde from the misery of prison wrote his great and moving letter reflecting on his plight under the heading 'De Profundis'. But the psalm has properly been identified as penitential – which is to say that its focus, unlike some other psalms, is not on the trials which the psalmist or Israel suffers, but on the wrongs which the speaker has done. For no sooner has the psalmist cried out, asking that the Lord should hear the voice of his supplication, than he is assailed by a doubt as to whether he will be heard. For 'if thou, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?'

The dance marathons of depression era America, depicted in another image, posed the question ‘who shall stand?’ in a rather literal way. Competitors, tempted in their poverty by cash prizes – here, $1000 held out by a skeletal hand in the top left of the picture – would dance for sometimes not merely days, but weeks on end, until whoever was left standing was declared the winner.

This particular contest is in its 49th day (so the sign to the right of the band declares), and surely its very final stages. The woman in red in the foreground is propped up by her partner, but, like all the other dancers, is close to collapse. The scene before us is frozen, but we suspect that were it not, we would be witnessing not dancing so much as the staggering of those who are on their last legs. It is only a matter of time – and not very much time – before the remaining dancers collapse on to the floor with the others.

Conservative moralists criticized these dance marathons as encouraging illicit liaisons, but notwithstanding the skin-tight clothes of the participants, their exaggerated makeup and musculature, and their abandoned embraces, the picture suggests death throes more than the throes of passion. In fact the dancers are on a cobweb, as you may already have noticed, and the painter is as interested in drawing attention to those who have woven this web, as to those caught in it. Where in a medieval painting we might find donors – at front right and front left – we glimpse two spectators. On the left, a woman’s hand, with its bright red nail and a gaudy bangle at the wrist, grips the rail surrounding the arena, just as, presumably, she is gripped by this spectacle of suffering and degradation. To the right, a man with a fat cigar stuck in his mouth and absurdly blonde hair, advances a podgy hand with stubby fingers – as if to receive a share of the proceeds. But these two, who occupy the place of the donors in medieval pictures, do not look piously on a redemptive scene as those donors would, but leer at a spectacle animated by that deathly hand holding out the $1000 bill, under whose presiding spell no one is really left standing.

Of course, the craze for dance marathons was a passing thing – but the picture surely invites us to consider whether others, not only these few, dance to the tune of dollar bills. For America of the 1930s is not the only place where an invisible hand, cash in hand, leads us all in a merry dance, turning the dance of life into a grim dance of death.

The psalmist, in what imperilment we do not know, cries out to God, only to be brought up short by the remembrance not of the wrong he suffers, but of the wrongs he has done? O Lord, he asks, who shall stand?

Who shall stand? Can the prodigal son stand? Rembrandt illustrated incidents from the story of the prodigal son in many, many, works, imagining him at the beginning of the story carousing in a tavern with a harlot as he ‘wasted his substance in riotous living’, and at the end, returning to his father’s forgiving embrace. In the little drawing of c.1650, which you can see, Rembrandt depicts the prodigal not at the beginning or end of his story, but at his lowest point – which is also the story’s mid-point and turning point – when the prodigal is down on his luck – on his knees, as we say, and here literally so. He has been reduced to caring for swine and is in such straitened circumstances that he would gladly share their food. His days as a riotous playboy are far behind him – he is bony and emaciated and, like an old man, seems to need that stick for support as much as for herding his charges. He is, however, so turned in on himself that he seems hardly to notice the pigs, as lost in his thoughts as they are intent on their food.

With the greatest economy and delicacy, Rembrandt has depicted the very moment when, in these abject depths, the possibility of forgiveness and so of hope, dawns on the prodigal’s mind. On his knees, as if in prayer, he hesitantly and tentatively entertains the thought of the psalmist, that ‘there is forgiveness with thee’. It is the very dawn of hope. Like the first

signs seen by those ‘that watch for the morning’, it is no more than a glimmer, a ray of light. But it is just that – an inkling that the prodigal may indeed rise from his knees and may once more stand before his father.

Each of Psalms 120 to 134, including this psalm, Psalm 130, is headed ‘a song of ascent’. The significance of this liturgical marking, which dates from after the psalms’ composition, is by no means clear, but a commonly favoured view is that these psalms were recited by pilgrims as they climbed towards Jerusalem. However that may be, Psalm 130 contains a sort of ascent within itself. The psalmist, begins in the depths, crying out to God, asks who shall stand if the Lord should mark iniquities, brings to mind that there is forgiveness with God, and so finds hope – which he then commends to his people: ‘Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.’

The psalms exist, in a manner of speaking, to be borrowed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave one of the best general descriptions of the psalter when he referred to it as the prayer book of the Bible. The prayers are in very different moods – some implore, some complain, some exhort, some express hope, some voice despair, some sing in triumph, others lament the unfairness of it all in bitter and vengeful tones. But they are nearly all of them prayers – snatches of conversation with God, which like our conversations with one another, in whatever mood or tone they are conducted, are moves in the construction, reconstruction, or sometimes the destruction, of a relationship. But when I say that the Psalms exist to be borrowed, I mean to say that they are not just records of other people’s conversations, as if we are eavesdropping for the sake of it – or at least, even if they are records of other people’s conversations, the psalms have survived and been cherished not as a collection of someone else’s prayers, which may or may not be very interesting, but as a primer for and prompter of our own. They have survived and been treasured, not merely as a collection of someone else’s words, but as a source book from which we may find words for ourselves.

We are perhaps most short of words, at our most wordless, when we are in the deepest depths. The triumph of the monument in New York, is just that it says very little, but speaks – wordlessly – the great cry of human pain, out of the depths, which readers of this psalm have so readily borrowed in times of trial and torment. But the real question, I think, is not whether, in our troubles, we can identify with the psalmist’s starting point, but whether we can follow the unfolding logic of the psalm, from despair to hope, whether we can join the psalmist not just in the abyss, but whether we can also accompany him in his ascent to that glorious affirmation ‘O Israel, trust in the Lord’.

The original design for the 9/11 Memorial placed these vast pools in a bare, bleak and even vaster plaza, but that scheme was modified by the planting of a grid of some 400 trees around the pools and in the square in which they are found. The addition of the trees, without detracting from the solemn statement made by the abysmal pools, places the absences they proclaim in a context of growth, renewal and rebirth. Symbolically that is itself a powerful statement – for the voice of lament affirms life even in the very act of mourning. I mean that even as we cry out in face of grievous loss, our cries witness to the dearness of human life, affirming its value as we proclaim the pain of its absence, attesting, however unwillingly in a manner of speaking, to the claim new and continuing life makes upon us, even as we mourn the passing of other lives. The trees speak of that affirmation.

But I am not sure that that quite amounts to hope – or at least it is a very bare and thin hope – the hope or expectation that life will continue, that we shall go on, that we shall persist, that life will not end. What would it be to hope for more than this – to hope for a

future in which human life is more than a matter of survival, more than just going on in spite of it all? What would it be to hope for a redeemed life?

The missing bit here – the bit which is more difficult to borrow from the psalm – is the invitation to place the wrongs we suffer in relation to the wrongs we have done; to place them, that is to say, in the context of the forgiveness we need.

Of course, when we are the authors and makers of the depths from which we cry out – as was the prodigal son in the story – it comes more readily to us to think of forgiveness. If the hole in which we find ourselves – wishing we could share the food of the pigs – is a hole we have dug all by ourselves, then the (albeit slightly theatrical) line, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son', finds its way to our lips. But what of the case where the depths from which we cry are not of our making? What if the depths are depths to which we have been consigned by the actions of others – by their violence, betrayal, cruelty, greed, or even by their merely casual and thoughtless indifference? What then is the case for turning from the wrongs we suffer, to the wrongs we have done? What is the sense or purpose of examining our own lives even when the wrongs which puts us in the depths are the work of others, not our own?

For most of us, even a modest and gentle exercise in self-examination will persuade us that we have sometimes wronged those who are dearest to us, let alone those who aren't at all dear to us. That we stand in need of, can only stand, in virtue of forgiveness, ought to convince us that the sinner – even the sinner who has wronged us – is not, so to say, 'wholly other'. The one who has wronged us in some way, however much we may quite rightly and very properly resent the wrong they have done, does not stand on the other side of some gulf, with 'us' on one side, and them on the 'other'. Self-examination surely persuades us of our solidarity in sin, even with those who may have consigned us to the depths.

O Lord, if thou should mark iniquities, who shall stand? To ask and answer that question honestly – to place ourselves in the same company with those who have wronged us – is the first step – only the first step, but still a step – towards possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the knowledge that we stand as sinners, with sinners, before God, a possibility for renewed human community is opened up – the possibility of something better than mere survival in spite of the wrongs we have suffered, something better than merely going on in the face of it all – the possibility of a future in which the divisions between us which have issued in these wrongs, may be resolved and overcome.

The psalms are to be borrowed. It is an easy thing to take up the cry from the depths. It is less easy to ask 'who shall stand?' and say, from our hearts, no one. So let us pray for the grace to borrow that part of the psalm too, so that with the psalmist we may ascend, from the depths, to the heights of that great affirmation: O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.