

Sermon
18 August 2013
Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Psalm 25

You probably all know that we are just back from a holiday in SA. We had a wonderful time! Apart from spending time with friends and family, we also stayed at the beach and in the bush for a while. And it was at *these* times, when we were living close to nature, that I was once again amazed by the greatness of God.

In the *obvious* things, I could see and feel God's presence – like in the beautiful sunsets, the huge elephants quietly crossing the road, the leopard lying lazily on a rock... But also where I didn't expect it, hidden beneath the surface, I became aware of God's presence – like in the trees that grew in bundles on termite hills, because beneath the ground the termites unknowingly planted the seeds while they gathered food, or in the whale hiding behind the waves and all of a sudden surprising me by braking the surface of the ocean by splashing it's huge tail.

God is everywhere – where you expect him to be and where you don't – *there*, he often surprises you...

And David, the author of Psalm 25, knew that.

David was surrounded by hostile people. He wasn't in a good position at all. So what did he do? Panic? Try to run away and hide? Try to change his circumstances? No, although these are some of the obvious things we do when we are in difficult situations, David didn't do any of them.

His solution was to pray. He expressed his *trust* in God by means of a prayer. And in his prayer we can see that David was committed to the Lord's ways, because he doesn't just ask God to take his problems away. No. He desires an informed mind, when he says "show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths", and he desires a conformed life, when he says "guide me in your truth and teach me".

He doesn't expect God to just miraculously take his hardship away, but to be with him and to help him understand, to help him make sense out of what is happening to him. He asks God to change his circumstances, but accepts that God knows best.

It is very clear that David knew that God would be with him in his difficult circumstances, because he starts this prayer by saying: "to you, o Lord, I lift up my soul". By saying that he is "lifting up" his soul, he declares that God alone is the solution for his every need, because in Old Testament times they believed that God lived *up there* somewhere, behind the clouds and the sky where no-one could see him; and by saying that he is lifting up his "soul", he shows that

he trusts the Lord with *everything* in him, because the word “soul” in the Hebrew language refers not only to a particular part of a person, but to a person as a whole, it refers to everything you are, inside and out.

The interesting thing about this prayer of David, is that it says *more* than we can see. With *words*, David says that he trusts the Lord. But then he says the same thing again by means of the *way* in which he wrote the prayer.

Unfortunately, in our translation we cannot see this at all, but in the original Hebrew text, the verses in this prayer begin with the successive letters of the alphabet. The first verse starts with the Hebrew letter “a”, the second with “b”, and then it continues in that fashion until the last verse starts with “z”. (I’ve brought the Hebrew Bible along if anyone wanted to have a look at it after the service.)

So, in a sense, this prayer can be called an ABC for a day of trouble.

The content of the prayer is also organized according to a specific structure: David begins and ends the prayer by expressing hope and trust. And then, in the middle, there is a prayer for forgiveness, and he asks for guidance for sinners. Then there is a prayer for forgiveness again, and then he asks for guidance for God-fearers.

Technically, this is called an acrostic poem – it was a well known form of writing in Old Testament times. But if you look closely you’ll see

that in actual fact this poem is a *broken* acrostic, because here and there something is missing.

So – hidden beneath the surface, there is another message. By means of *words* David says that he trusts the Lord. But by using a *broken* acrostic style to say this, he confirms what he has just said. The brokenness in this style reflects the way troubles break the pattern of life itself. Yet - a pattern remains. Because, God is there.

Just like in nature. You cannot miss the huge elephants when they walk across the road, but in the ocean, under the surface of the water, hides a whale, just as big or even bigger, but you wouldn't even know that if it didn't flap its tail. God is always there – whether we see him or not.

We just have to trust him. Trust him that he will never leave us alone, that he is still there when it is harder for us to see him because of the things we have to go through.

But what is trust? This *thing* that David describes with so much self confidence in a time of trouble?

Once again I want to explain this by referring to nature. Where we were staying in the game reserve, there were a lot of yellow-billed hornbills. Relatively big birds with yellow beaks. And the ranger who took us on safari told us something very interesting about these birds.

He said that hornbills mate for life. A pair of nesting hornbills will build a nest in a hollow branch or cavity within a cliff face. After mating, the female will enter the nest and the pair will work together to seal the entrance, using nesting materials, like mud and their own feces to cement the gap closed, leaving only a small space through which the male will pass the female food. The female hornbill will then pull out her flight and tail feathers to line the nest. The female then lays 2-3 eggs, incubates these eggs for 25 days and feeds the young for the first three weeks of life by regurgitating the food brought to her by the male.

In other words – the female bird *trusts* the male that he will feed her, and later their babies too. She trusts him so much, that she allows him to seal her inside that nest, with only a wee hole big enough for his beak to feed her through, and then she pulls out her feathers, which means that she wouldn't be able to fly, even if she wanted to. And while she is 100% reliant on him to take care of her, her feathers slowly grow back.

Now *that* is what I call trust!

That is the kind of trust *David* had in God. That is the kind of trust we should have in God.

Without being able to see the male, the female hornbill patiently waits for him to bring her food. And he always does. She trusts him to do it.

If we are in situations where everything around us seems dark, when we feel as if we are trapped in an enclosed space with nowhere to go, when we feel as if our “feathers” are pulled out, our hands and feet are chopped off, like we cannot get away from our circumstances and neither can we do anything to change it – we should just trust in God. Trust that he knows what we are going through. Trust that he knows best. That he will keep on taking care of us, amidst our difficult circumstances, and that while he is “feeding” us little by little, our “feathers” will grow back.

David did this – and he had an amazing life. He went from ordinary shepherd-boy to most loved king in the history of Israel. He had lots of ups and downs, but he knew that he was never alone.

Trust in God – with everything in you – and you will have an amazing life too.

Amen