

Psalm 3 (Feb 11, Robinson College, Cambridge)

It's a few years since I've stood here, it is very good to be here again and I am grateful to Maggi for the invitation to preach. I think last time I came, was to a joint service with Fitzwilliam where I was chaplain for three years – but that feels like a long time ago. I'm now in my fifth year at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, in central London, whose greetings I bring. Bloomsbury Baptist is a 19th century church, founded by an MP with the express intent of integrating the political and worshipping life found both in the wealth of Bloomsbury and the slums of Saint Giles. So, the invitation to preach on a psalm, is particularly welcome – given that the psalms themselves voice both the politics and the theology of a strong religious heritage.

Anti government protests in one Middle Eastern country have forced the nation's leader to quit the capital. He'd been there for decades, and the masses had become tired of corruption – and the greatest worry he's left behind was that of security. I am, of course, referring to King David – who around 1000bc, had to abandon Jerusalem when civil war broke out. This is the context, we are told, in which Psalm 3 was written by David.

In fact, the cause of the civil war was a beautiful woman: Absalom was the third son of David, and had a sister called Tamar. And one day, Tamar comes rushing to Absalom, distraught and desolate, we read – because she has been raped by Amnon – King David's eldest son. Absalom is furious, and goes straight to King David. And what does David do, on learning that his firstborn son has committed rape? King David does nothing. So, Absalom takes the law into his own hands – and kills Amnon.

Eventually, long story short, Absalom rises against his father David. All Absalom wanted was justice, and it's not difficult to imagine how he would feel justified. The people flock to him, knowing his cause to be just – and David is forced to flee Jerusalem. And it is at this stage that David writes this psalm.

So, no offence to the choir, but when we sing psalm 3 – what are we doing exactly? This is a beautiful song of worship that has its roots in atrocious moral cowardice. In what way do we apply this to our lives? One of my favourite birthday cards was from my sister, and had a picture of two Knights Templar on horseback at the crusades, both with huge English grins as one said to the other, "Isn't life simple when you know you're right all the time!"

What on earth is King David doing, pleading for justice when justice is clearly on the side of Absalom? The message of the psalm seems to be: "act how you like, assume that God is on your side, and that you are right." There's no remorse, no self doubt, no recognition that he is in the mess of his own making.

When you read the psalm in context – you might well question the emotional intelligence of its author. But this was the man who, after all, rose to power by cheating! We all remember the story of David and Goliath: Two champions going out to face one another to prevent 2 armies destroying each other. Goliath standing there like Hulk Hogan, armed with a sword – and David the shepherd-boy, what does he do? He pulls out a 7.65 semi-automatic Wulther PPK, and shoots Goliath in the head. It's called, cheating and yet, we are told David is a man after God's own heart. He remains the epitome of an Israelite king! What do we do with someone like this, who's written psalms like this?

Of course, 3000 years later, we are at a safe enough distance to bash David with our modern sensibilities. The violence that was in the air that David breathed, is not really in our own atmosphere... Or is it?

If you want to see violence, go to an under ten's football match on a Saturday morning – go to an under ten's football match on a Saturday morning – and watch the parents. Justice, of course, is always on their side.

I think it's fair to say, that I have seen more violence in four years as a Baptist minister in central London, than in seven years' military service. Largely through our work with homeless people, students and members of our church have been physically attacked on several occasions, verbally attacked more times than I can remember, been woken in the night by Policemen, by council workers, and by an inebriated businessman preparing to empty his bladder onto a sleeping bag full of student. Most people ready to inflict their own particular brand of violence on another, are convinced – one way or another – that justice is on their side.

More widely, we could ask about political and economic violence. What is David asking with this psalm? For God just to bail him out of the mess that his own policy has got him into, simply so that he can go back to carry on being the same? Some economists would claim that the current banking scandals embody the spirit of psalm 3: We've got ourselves into a mess we can't get out of. We need to be bailed out. But little recognition that we got ourselves into this mess. And how do we get ourselves out of it? By carrying on in the same way we always have.

The spirit of David is alive and well beneath the veneer of our modernist sensibilities.

So I wonder if it's best to hear the psalm in all its gritty honesty, within the military context in which it was forged. How would we hear this as one of David's soldiers? How would you feel if you were in David's household guard, fleeing with him from the capital, hearing the taunts and jeers of the people as you passed by? David's expeditionary force has been annihilated by the enemy. The outlook is not good. "David's brought this upon himself!" you might think. But David is a charismatic leader. So - How on earth is the silver-haired, silver-tongued warmongering hymn-writer going to rally his troops?

I can't help picturing Shakespeare's Henry V, outnumbered six to one on the field of Agincourt, wondering how on earth he's going to inspire the soldiers to fight well. And the product is one of the most celebrated portions of English literature. Well –David is in precisely this situation. What is he going to say to inspire his soldiers? The result is what we know today as Psalm 3.

If this is the function of the psalm, it doesn't have to raise questions of remorse and self-doubt. If you're familiar with the biblical narrative, you know well enough that David did feel those things strongly enough as he fled Jerusalem, and the psalm assumes familiarity with the story. But remorse and self loathing are not what you want to express when you're trying to rally the troops. To use that speech to express your regret and repentance, really would be overly ego-centric. The words of this psalm, and the clue given by the text itself to their interpretation, suggest a very specific purpose.

You are surrounded. Militarily, your situation is hopeless. And your leader? Is God going to bless him? God has forgotten him. It may seem to us that the psalm is ego-centric. It's all deliver me, hit my enemies, I will not fear. But I suppose you could say it's the royal 'me' – which in the mouth of a king should be read as an 'us'!

David was an anointed King – not self appointed. He plays on his status as King to claim that God will answer him from Jerusalem. Whatever David has done, God is going to protect him because God has promised to protect him. And maybe, the best way to make sense of this psalm is simply as a rallying call to encourage dejected soldiers – each of whom can make the words of this psalm their own. It's the ancient Jewish equivalent to a Winston Churchill speech. And in that sense, it seems to have done the job.

It looks as though this psalm works to remind people in a hopeless situation, in a mess of their own making, that God has not forgotten them. And their salvation is not dependant upon any goodness of their own, but upon the status God himself has conferred upon them. Whatever else David has done, God has made promises to David – and if David has broken those promises, God has not.

In the midst of a horrific situation, God, for some reason – has not let go of David. It does not seem fair – and I think it's fair to say that many of the things God does are not fair. We don't know the precise details about Absalom's rebellion, or how things turned out with his sister or for lots of others in the story. All we are left with is a God who seems almost unjust in his commitment to someone who doesn't deserve it.

And then we look at our lives – and we think of our confession, and maybe wonder what it would be like if – in our darkest moments – God dealt with us justly, as we deserve. And maybe we would hope for a God who seems almost unjust in his commitment to us, who don't deserve it. And maybe, it's when we identify ourselves with David in his ugliest moments, in his sinfulness and shame – that we see something of who God really is.

A God who blesses, who delivers and who saves people who don't deserve to be blessed and delivered and saved.

Psalm 3, then, may be read as David's plea for what – a thousand years later – would become known as the Gospel.