

Psalm 25:1-9

A sermon by Tom Frame (27/09/20)

Since the 1980s, doing your family tree has become hugely popular, and for some people it has become either an obsession or a heartache. It is difficult to know what real connection we have people who died a century ago, who were no closer than fifth cousins, had a different name to us and had vastly different experiences. My family tree brings me no comfort. It raises more questions than it answers, and leaves me feeling different, distinct - even unique. Domestic violence and alcoholism, broken marriages and abandoned children; there is not much elucidating my life or encouraging my living in that. And yet, I am a product of that biology and it conveys a small sense of my identity although I continue to decipher what that might be. I can only hope and pray that your family tree has people who have laid a positive foundation for your life and inspired you by their triumphs and in their travails.

Of course, there are some people whose lives are almost pre-determined by their family of origin. Take the Windsors or the Packers - there is expectation and a sense of history to be embraced and enhanced or possibly transcended and re-written. Psalm 25 on pages 244-45, is a prayer that might be offered by someone who has just been liberated from "family of origin" theology, who has handed a religion by their parents and expected to follow as a part of a tradition, and seeks now to embrace God's way for himself or herself. The assertion: "I come from a good family" is challenged by this psalm of personal accountability - it's message is that God will neither require children to pay for the sins of their parents, nor allow them to rest satisfied in their parents' goodness; rather, God will judge each person according to his or her own deeds. Let me guide you through the text.

Psalm 25 is intimate and intensely personal, voiced in the first person singular and addressing God in the second person singular. And woven through this appointed portion of the psalm, verses 1-9 (although you could go to verse 10) are four key themes: the psalmist's total surrender to God and variations on three imperatives which are addressed to God: don't let me be put to shame; show, teach, and lead me in your paths; and remember yourself and your character, and forget me and mine.

The psalmist's surrender is rendered most eloquently in the opening line, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." For a moment, allow yourself to contemplate this offering of the deepest, truest part of the self ... to God. The act of submission is touching in its profound vulnerability, and is simultaneously strong in its intention (foreshadowing Jesus' insistence in John 18 that "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.").

This theme of surrender reappears in verse 2, "I put my trust in you ..." and again in verse 5, "in you have I trusted all day long." This psalm is best understood through a mindset of self-offering, reminding Christian believers that the "path" toward which God finally "leads" us is the way of the cross. It should not be lost on us that the self-offering of a "lifted up soul" can lead to crucifixion – as it did for Jesus.

The first imperative "Let me not be put to shame ..." sets the tone for verses 2 and 3. It reveals a hint of human fear and doubt that lightly, but effectively, restrains the psalmist's trust. (Some commentators prefer to translate this phrase as "Let me not be disappointed ...") The psalm is the testimony of someone strong in faith: "Yes, you are God; yes, I trust you; yes, I am as sure as I can be, that your ways are right." But then comes, "but please, please don't disappoint me; please let me be right about you!" Here with the psalmist we come face-to-face with all that's at stake, when we surrender ourselves in faith -- even when that surrender is to the God, whose gracious mercy we know so well. The shadow side of trust is the yearning for that trust to be vindicated. The circular paradox is the hint of doubt is addressed to the one we've already been empowered to trust.

The second imperative, "show me your ways ... teach me your paths," plays on the iconic metaphor of "life as journey". And it is. We can infer that the psalmist believes that many paths are available and that confusion among them is inevitable -- thus the need for instruction and guidance. We can feel confronted and bewildered by the choices of offer: between good and better, and bad and worse – or so they seem. The psalmist asks God to be present and *directive* about the best way to go (verses 4, 7, and 9) – best being that which leads us nearer to God. If only Google Maps had a setting for God's voice and the divine destination.

The third imperative, in two parts, dominates verses 7-9. It is a calling on God to remember God's own character (which is compassionate, loving, steadfast, faithful, gracious, and upright) and *not* to remember the

psalmist's character (which is selfish, self-centred and sinful). Here the psalmist pushes even further and asks for release from the sins of *his or her own former self!* Even for the Christian who embraces confession, and recalls the forgiveness offered in and through baptism (that we are washed clean from any sense of inherited sin – the sin of Adam – as well as freed from the taint of our own sin), the psalmist's request is daring, fresh, and hopeful.

My lived experience is being haunted by bad decisions and sinful choices – many from the years of my youth when I thought I knew so much ... before I realised that I understand so little. Back then, the things I did were without consequences to me or you or the community or the environment, or the consequences (never great) would dissipate with time. All that remains, are regrets. I am not sure how you handle them. Someone once sang: “Regrets, I’ve had a few ... But then again, too few to mention”. I am not sure that is how it is for most people. We go through life accumulating regrets. You can, of course, leave them in the past.

My experience, is that they return to haunt when you can’t sleep – or they come in dreams that disrupt sleep and then they can turn to remorse. Especially for things we cannot now put right. These regrets turn ugly, if not nasty, when they cause shame that might lead to guilt. Of course, sleep is a good way to reset the memory and to force things into the past although some are defiant and will not stay there. We need to take our regrets seriously – to deal with them – before they return to haunt and hurt and harm as shame and guilt. It is right that we should be ashamed of some things we might have done but when they shame morphs into guilt, that is when we need to think of confession. It is serious business. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer leaves us in no doubt about this when we are sincere. The words of the general confession are apposite: We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; **the remembrance of them is grievous unto us**; the burden of **them** is intolerable.

Here we return to the Psalm and a blinding contrast. We are often hard on ourselves and unforgiving. But if God hears us recite the Psalm, and that is a given, the Psalmist finds a way out of the intolerable burden of sin: he remembers everlasting compassion and divine love, God is focussed on those things and *not* our former sins and previous selfishness. This message of truth is not new but we need to hear it again and again. When we come here, we might ask: what do we want, what do we need? The Psalmist says we should want to hear more about how God's gracious character makes it possible -- even necessary, even inevitable -- for God

to set free those whose burden is facing the material consequences of their "former sins": incarceration, injury, loneliness, exile, disinheritance or ill-health.

And we will want to hear more those things when we approach God not seeking our own affirmation and approval, but with meekness and humility. It is only when we realise our poverty, that we acknowledge the wealth that God offers. We may be rich in things but poor in soul. That can change, and change in our worship today, we when come with repentance and leave with absolution. There is much in this Psalm for us all. I commend it to your reflection this coming week.