

Psalm 36

The well of life

- 1 Sin whispers to the wicked, in the depths of their heart;
there is no fear of God before their eyes.
- 2 They flatter themselves in their own eyes
that their abominable sin will not be found out.
- 3 The words of their mouth are unrighteous and full of
deceit;
they have ceased to act wisely and to do good.
- 4 They think out mischief upon their beds
and have set themselves in no good way;
nor do they abhor that which is evil.
- 5 Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens
and your faithfulness to the clouds.

- 6 Your righteousness stands like the strong mountains,
your justice like the great deep;
you, Lord, shall save both man and beast.
- 7 How precious is your loving mercy, O God!
All mortal flesh shall take refuge
under the shadow of your wings.
- 8 They shall be satisfied with the abundance of your house;
they shall drink from the river of your delights.
- 9 For with you is the well of life
and in your light shall we see light.
- 10 O continue your loving-kindness to those who know you
and your righteousness to those who are true of heart.
- 11 Let not the foot of pride come against me,
nor the hand of the ungodly thrust me away.
- 12 There are they fallen, all who work wickedness.
They are cast down and shall not be able to stand.

Reflection

Despite beginning on the most negative of notes, this is a Psalm of hope, containing one of the most memorable verses of the entire psalter.

Verses 1 to 4 explore, more fully than elsewhere, the destructive and barren life of 'the wicked'.

Verses 5 to 7 focus on God whose love and justice underpin the Universe and save humankind.

Verses 8 to 10 – the richest part of the Psalm – focus on the delights found through God. This needs wide interpretation.

The Psalm ends with a prayer to be preserved from the fate of 'the wicked'. Here is the same emphasis we have seen before – for example in Psalm 1 – but this Psalm helps us to see and explore it more clearly.

'Sin whispers to the wicked in the depths of their heart; there is no fear of God before their eyes'. This sinister opening verse captures the essence of what the Psalms mean by 'wickedness'. It means having to summon up life entirely for yourself, for there is no shred of belief that life might be given you, from beyond.

In the barren world of 'the wicked', 'I am the centre, and the search for life stops with 'me'. But this 'me' cannot be the bearer of life so I need to inflate myself to try to be so. The 'wicked' thus engage in all kinds of 'flattery of themselves in their own eyes'. They puff themselves up, they promote themselves, they engage in all kinds of display and pretence, and inevitably they conflict with others who may threaten their place centre stage. Their 'abominable sin' is to think they can take the place of the mystery of God, who is the true Bearer and Giver of life. In the void of their hearts there can never be rest, only the constant whispering and plotting of strategies to fill the emptiness, to promote the self. In this nightmarish world of 'mischief', of the spawning of

evil, there is no moral code to guide, no 'abhorring of that which is evil', for there is only 'me' – a fabricated ballooning pretence – and the destruction of anything that is not 'me'.

The truly through-and-through 'wicked' are very rare. Such a person will have lost touch with himself, for there is no true self, only a void. He will have lost touch with others, for relationships in which there is any real giving and receiving become impossible. And such a person, consumed with the project of their own self, will have lost touch with the undersong of love and justice that underpins the world. Such a person will be mad, for madness is detachment from reality. But they are dangerous, and the twentieth century has known them: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and others who thought out terrible 'mischief', who did not 'abhor that which is evil'.

In verses 1 to 4, the psalmist delves into the roots of evil. Perhaps verses 5 to 9 are his reaction to his own delving, as though he cannot bear talking about this evil any longer. In the sharpest of contrasts to what has gone before they are a hymn to transcendence, in which he affirms in the strongest possible language the eternal Holy One who saves the world from the destructive curse of this unbridled egoism. His love reaches to the heavens, his faithfulness to the clouds, his righteousness is like the mountains, his justice like the great deep. These are the deepest realities. And most of all, most precious (verse 7), there is his loving mercy offering refuge to all mortal flesh, to every one of us who are constantly tempted in lesser ways to forget the mystery of God, and listen to the whisperings of our own self-congratulation.

Verses 8 and 9 are the heart of this Psalm. Savour the richness of these images. In its original context 'the abundance of your house' probably referred to the Temple in Jerusalem, and, in its references to water and life, the creation-centred theology taught and celebrated there. We need to think more widely.

The fundamental contrast at the heart of this Psalm is between, on the one hand, those who try to make life in their own image because it is never a gift and there is no God to give it. And on the other hand those who know real life always comes as gift, and who by their patient attentiveness and trust reveal their faith – perhaps their hidden faith – in this sense that life is gift. In response to this, some will explicitly seek the face of God, and worship. But there are many others of widely differing skills – musicians, painters, poets, comedians, lovers, carers, craftspeople, engineers, scientists, farmers, gardeners – who though they may not be explicitly religious, will simply know, with a knowledge too deep for words, that real life comes as gift, and the secret of their skill is in waiting for it to be given. Whether or not they 'believe', there will be a search for 'inspiration' surrounding all their best endeavours, and in response to that sense of 'inspiration' their best work will be done.

Whether it is called a 'flash of inspiration', or a 'moment of insight', or when 'the penny dropped', or when we say, 'aha, I see', or 'the light dawned', or it suddenly 'came to me'; or when we stand back and gaze in astonishment 'lost for words' – our language gives us away. We *know* that life is gift.

These are moments when we cease trying to make anything happen, and in gratitude, say:

[We are] satisfied with the abundance of your house,
[and] . . . drink from the river of your delights,

For with you is the well of life,
and in your light shall we see light.

Verse 9 is a high point. In these words life has been gifted to this poet. Inspiration has come. Through God's light dawning on him he is able to see light.

Then, in verses 10 and 11 his mood quite suddenly changes. There is a note of desperation. Fearful that the whispering sin of pride ('I did this all myself') will steal away his sense of dependence on the Giver he prays, 'O continue your loving kindness to those who know you . . .' He fears too that somehow the interventions of others will 'thrust him away' from the stream of life he has so joyfully entered. The Psalm shows how this sense of life as gift is fragile and easily lost. But we need not fear, the river goes on flowing and the well is deep.

Give thanks for those moments when you have sensed that life is gift. How do you tend to block or obstruct that gift? Or block it in others?

Quietly repeat:

With you is the well of life, and in your light shall we see light.

Psalm From to cor

1 I lift up my eyes
from where

2 My help comes
the maker of

3 He will not see
he who watches

4 Behold, he who
shall neither

5 The Lord hears
the Lord is your

6 So that the stars
neither the moon