

in the Christian churches, the rabbi is a teacher rather than a priest. It's primarily an academic thing, a symbolic laying on of hands by the president of the college at the completion of the academic studies. But the rabbi is then on his own. A placement commission will help, but the contract is ultimately between the rabbi and the particular congregation. And formerly resistance to a woman was very strong, even more from the women in the congregation than from the men. However, women's lib has changed attitudes rapidly.

Q. You recognise the help given you by women's lib. But you do not think of yourself as involved in that movement?

A. Just as I did not come to the seminary in search of a husband, neither did I come to champion women's rights. I came because of a deep belief in Judaism and a firm conviction that I might have something to offer. To shout for female equality is not enough. Nothing will be accomplished if there are no women who want to serve on congregational boards or become rabbis or share in the decision-making of religious institutions. If women are to be fully accepted, then there must be a change in attitudes and that change must begin with ourselves. Natural feminine charm and sensitivity are a woman's most important assets in the fight for equality. But, before equality, the Jewish woman puts Judaism itself.

My one companion is darkness

by Gerard Mackrell, S.M.M.

Lord my God, I call for help by day;
I cry at night before you.
Let my prayer come into your presence.
O turn your ear to my cry.

For my soul is filled with evils;
my life is on the brink of the grave.
I am reckoned as one in the tomb:
I have reached the end of my strength,

like one alone among the dead;
like the slain lying in their graves;
like those you remember no more,
cut off, as they are, from your hand.

You have laid me in the depths of the tomb,
 in places that are dark, in the depths.
 Your anger weighs down upon me :
 I am drowned beneath your waves.

You have taken away my friends
 and made me hateful in their sight.
 Imprisoned, I cannot escape :
 my eyes are sunken with grief.

I call to you, Lord, all the day long ;
 to you I stretch out my hands.
 Will you work your wonders for the dead ?
 Will the shades stand and praise you ?

Will your love be told in the grave
 or your faithfulness among the dead ?
 Will your wonders be known in the dark
 or your justice in the land of oblivion ?

As for me, Lord, I call to you for help :
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 Lord, why do you reject me ?
 Why do you hide your face ?

Wretched, close to death from my youth,
 I have borne your trials ; I am numb,
 Your fury has swept down upon me ;
 your terrors have utterly destroyed me.

They surround me all the day like a flood,
 they assail me all together.
 Friend and neighbour you have taken away ;
 my one companion is darkness.¹

‘My one companion is darkness’.

It is difficult to find among all the psalms a cry as heart-rending as this. There are psalms which have their fair share of misery, but usually this is interspersed, or finally dispersed, by hope in God’s ultimate rescue act. The man who wrote this psalm, however, not only hung from the edge of the cliff but fell off it. Or at least he is still hanging there at the end, and there is no ‘Come next week’ to see how he is rescued. He isn’t rescued.

‘Lord my God, I call for help by day ;
 I cry at night before you’.

The astonishing thing about this psalm is that the poet never complains about God in a rebellious way. Nor is there panic. If there were

¹Psalm 87(88) in the Grail version, quoted with permission from *The Prayer of the Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970.

it could be followed by calm; the poet could rationalise himself into a less tempestuous mood. But here all the raging, if it ever existed, had ceased before the psalm starts. We cannot ask the psalmist to calm down and think, to analyse himself; he has already done that. Nor is there any point in asking him not to despair; he does not despair. In a sense that is the tragedy. Despair brings a certain calmness with it, a bowing to fate. But despair does not breed poems. Had the poet given up hope completely there would have been no psalm. Yet at times it is better to give up hope. At these times giving up hope can mean facing the truth. A wife who clings to the hope that her husband has survived the war when all the evidence is to the contrary may be wrecking her life. She sets the place at table for him day after day when she should be listening to the love of another. Instead she clings to the love of a ghost. She lives in a world of fantasy. In her case she should let hope gently though painfully wither, and then start again.

But this psalmist never gives up. He is '*on the brink of the grave*', not in it. He is only '*like one among the dead*'. It is useless to tell him that others have a more detached and optimistic view of his chances. They have not. In fact it is they who have despaired, not him: '*I am reckoned as one in the tomb*'. It is he who is desperately trying to get others not to give up hope in him. But where are the others?

'You have taken away my friends
And made me hateful in their sight'.
'Friend and neighbour you have taken away'.

This is even worse; his friends have walked away from him with the calm sadness with which one walks away from a grave. But 'I am not in the grave', he screams. But no one hears. It is like the voice of a ghost. This is the agony of this psalm, and of much of life. The sufferer does not abandon hope; his 'friends' do it for him. Now lie down and be still. Which means 'still'—dead. Much more comfortable for everyone. But the healthy man, and this tortured soul is most certainly healthy, will not, cannot, accept this. Hence the frightful anguish.

With his friends quietly departed his only companion is darkness. In more modern poetry this declaration would be ambiguous. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a fragment beginning 'The times are nightfall', writes:

'And I not help. Nor word now of success:
All is from wreck, here, there, to rescue one—
Work which to see scarce so much as begun
Makes welcome death, does dear forgetfulness'.

The same poet, who had more than a passing acquaintance with grief, also writes at the end of his sonnet 'No worst, there is none':

'Life death does end and each day dies with sleep'.

But this resignation does not last and we find the same man echoing the psalmist's fear and detestation of the negation, Darkness:

'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
 What hours, O what black hours we have spent
 This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
 And more must, in yet longer light's delay'.

Darkness for the same poet is described as the 'womb-of-all, tomb-of-all, hearse-of-all, Night'.

John Keats felt 'half in love with easeful death' and wished 'to cease upon the midnight with no pain'. But he was only *half in* love with death, and later in the same poem banishes this seductive notion. Yet the lure of darkness and death has proved too strong for many and led them to end their life with the bare bodkin of an overdose of sleeping pills. Alexander Pope's 'Eloisa to Abelard' shows at its most poignant the conflicting desire and fear of death in a woman deprived of her lover. She sees in death a union with him, but it is a cold, loveless union of dead ashes. In other words an almost Old Testament idea of the cold lifelessness of existence beyond the grave.

The psalmist is, unfortunately for him, strong and sane, with the instinctive desire to live. To live, not merely to survive. For him life means a freedom from the troubles he is in and the return of his reputation and friends. But, as we said, the tragedy is that the solution does not lie with him. We do not know the nature of his calamity, but it is beyond his control to remedy. So he batters at the doors of heaven. Hopkins found his prayers bouncing off a 'brazen heaven' and echoing back mockingly at him. The psalmist has the same experience:

'Lord, why do you reject me?
 Why do you hide your face'?

To the Jews God was a 'hidden God'. They were forbidden to make statues of him. Yet, to compensate, as it were, for this, they saw him everywhere: in the oceans, in the mighty winds, in the fruits of the earth. If, therefore, they suffered misfortunes they saw this as a sign that God had deserted them. Christ put this right when he said of the blind man that neither he nor his parents had sinned. But you try convincing people of that, especially Christians. Some commentators on this psalm have suggested that the psalmist may have had a hideous disease which kept his friends at a distance. It may not have been mere physical revulsion but the conviction that the wretch was a sinner. Today we divide illnesses into the respectable and non-respectable. A cancer patient, a heart sufferer, the victim of a car accident, may all be showered with sympathy and flowers. But what about those with mental illnesses, or venereal disease, or imprisonment? For them God is hidden.

But God is hidden only if we fail to see him in our neighbour. If

our neighbour disappears then in a sense God has disappeared. For God demands that our neighbour does not disappear, because if he does he takes God with him. It is true that in the depths of our being God is there, but that is not enough. And the psalmist thought like this. He was sacramental. He saw God in the good things that happened to him, in his children and friends. When they went, God went. Job is a startling exception to this.

'Friend and neighbour you have taken away'. No. They have taken themselves away, they have taken God away; not the other way round. Those involved in the rehabilitation of the sick or prisoners are forever asking us to co-operate. Those societies for alcoholics and drug addicts and the disabled are so very close to God. But they seem to be fighting a losing battle. 'Why do you hide your face'? That means, why do we hide *our* faces? Well, why do we? For we can be God to those on the brink of the grave. Walk away and we give them a gentle kick into that grave. Let there be no mistake about that.

'Imprisoned, I cannot escape'. Here is the ultimate. The modern psychiatrist, and more so his patient, needs no Scriptural scholar to elucidate that. If one refuses to despair in the face of the despair of others, then there is this exquisite agony of frustration. There is total bewilderment. Too much hope to give up, too little encouragement to pick up. No point of the compass to aim at. Darkness, loss of all bearings. It is then that there is dragged out the reluctant scream: 'I have reached the end of my strength'.

Reading this psalm one is invited to ask whether we should not have a little more of the Old Testament mentality in us. I would like to explain that. It is true that Christ makes it absolutely clear that we must help the unfortunate. The Good Samaritan, the visiting of the sick *and* imprisoned, the giving a cup of water, etc., are far more explicit in their insistence on the actions of God through men. Also in the New Testament God, or rather Christ, is on the receiving end: *I* was hungry and you gave me not to eat; as often as you did it to these, the least of my little ones, you did it to *me*. Yet the Gospel here and elsewhere is concerned with reward in another life. In the Old Testament, at least in the psalms, this notion does not exist. We can easily distort the New Testament teaching about heaven to excuse ourselves for callousness in this life; the suffering will receive their reward elsewhere. If we adopt something of the psalmist's attitude, however, we will be forced to action here and now. We will realise that to many who suffer, God is hidden and withdrawn, and that he will only appear through us.

'Will you work wonders for the dead?
Will the shades stand and praise you?'

Blasphemy to those who believe in the resurrection? It depends. A bouquet of flowers to the sick is more useful than a wreath to the dead. Don't be too quick to tell the suffering that their trials are the will of

God; Job's comforters tried that dodge. *We* are God in such cases, and often it is *our* will, not God's, which ordains the suffering. And we are visible. Visible in our kindness and in our indifference and hypocrisy. If we fail in making our own epiphanies we run a risk of disaster greater than that of the psalmist. 'Imprisoned, I cannot escape'. We become imprisoned in the selfishness of our own narrow lives. We ourselves will be walking in darkness, none the less impenetrable for the fact that we mistake it for light.

There is no happy ending to this psalm: 'My one companion is darkness'. The unhappiness is tinged with a glimmer of hope, as we have seen. But there would have been far more hope had the man who wrote this psalm realised that God was not punishing him, that God was not far from him, not trying to drown him beneath the waves. We cannot blame him for thinking as he did. He had the misfortune to be born before Christ, as many have the misfortune to be born in parts of the world that are almost uninhabitable. No, it was not God who withdrew himself, but his friends who shrank from him. His friends may have been able to do little to take away his calamity, but he seems to find their absence a very important part of his unhappiness. Well, that man is now dead, his restlessness quieted. But the poem lives on, and it is the inspired word of God. Not a mere literary elegy, but a message. A message not merely of comfort for those of us in similar circumstances—an attitude often taken towards this kind of psalm—but a message to those who can help. For they, in a sense, are the God to whom this poor man calls in vain.

No Soup Kitchens

by Edward Quinn

Lorsque les effets d'une politique intérieure menacent de démoraliser et d'exiler des centaines de milliers d'êtres humains, les considérations de correction diplomatique doivent faire place à des préoccupations de simple humanité. Je manquerais à mon devoir si je n'attirais l'attention du Conseil sur la situation actuelle et si je ne plaçais pour que l'opinion du monde, par l'intermédiaire de la Société des Nations, des Etats membres et non membres, fasse le nécessaire afin de remédier à la situation actuelle et écarter la tragédie menaçante.

(James G. McDonald, High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany, Letter of Resignation 27 December 1935.)