

Psalm 142 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 St. Luke 23:1-49

Out of Prison

As children, we used to love getting the “Get Out of Jail Free” card in the game of monopoly. Even though we had no idea at the time what being in prison could possibly be like, this card still represented a gift not earned and was therefore all the more special. Later in my life, I did experience the awfulness of a prison...not a literal one, but every bit as awful...my prison was a spiritual one and I felt as if someone had locked me in it and thrown away the key. The sense of utter powerlessness to change my life drove me to the point of despair and I had very much given up on life when the Lord Jesus sent a Youth for Christ Team my way and the message of love shone into the depths of my dark soul. The rest is, as they say, history...and yet, this was not the last time I would experience the awful sensation of abandonment and entrapment – even as a delivered child of God, there have been times when the darkness blotted out His light and my soul writhed in anguish and anxiety.

Now, you see this same despair and cry for help in our Psalm for this Maundy Thursday. According to the superscription, this Psalm was written by David while he was held up in a cave because he was being hunted and hounded by his own people. Now, in order to understand his struggle here, you need to remember that God had already told David through Samuel the prophet that he was to be king. He had already experienced God's blessing in so many ways, especially in battle. Add to this the blessing of a very close friendship with Jonathan, King Saul's son. But then everything began to fall apart...King Saul became jealous of David's success and popularity and attempted to kill him on several occasions, first subtly and then later blatantly and openly. And so David, the

successful, David, the promised king, David, the victor, had to flee for his life like a common criminal even though he had done nothing wrong. In an instant, he appeared to have lost everything.

Now, we don't know much about his time in this cave as 1 Samuel 22 has him in and out of it in one single verse...but the language of the Psalm reveals the immense strain David must have experienced at the time as his faith was stretched to breaking point. Imagine the confusion...did Samuel have it all wrong? Am I not meant to be king? What did I do to deserve such treatment – especially from the one who betrayed me? Who can I trust? Where can I run to? How can I protect my family? Where is God in all this? What does the future hold? And the blackness of the cave probably only made things worse...all of life must have seemed to be closing in on him...and so it comes as no surprise that he used the image of a prison...some black hole that had swallowed up his soul.

Hundreds of years later, we hear this cry again from a descendent of King David...but this time the plea is uttered in a garden and not in a cave. Nevertheless, the emotions are the same. Listen to how St. Luke describes our Lord's desperation in his Gospel. "Being in agony, Jesus prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." St. Mark says that Jesus was troubled and deeply distressed...that His soul was exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. In the words of His prayer one can hear the sense of being trapped. "Father, if it is Your will take the cup away from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." Like David, Jesus knew that He was to be King. But for Jesus there was this valley of death that lay between the promise and its fulfillment and He knew He had to cross the chasm in order to ascend the throne. There simply was no other way...and we witness His intense struggle with the

inevitable will of the Father on this night we call Maundy Thursday. Let us not pass by this desperate cry too quickly...let us linger here for a while to learn...

St. Paul once said that that which had been written before, had been written for our learning, so that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. So, what can we learn from the petitions of David in the cave and our Lord in the Garden? Well, for one, as we listen to the pain filled prayers of King David and our Lord Jesus, and then consider the eventual replies, we learn that even when life seems to surround us and press in on every side, God never deserts us. David's stay in the darkness of the cave was temporary even though for him the experience seemed overwhelming at the time. Likewise, our Lord's stay in the darkness of the tomb was temporary even though in the Garden, the agony of the cross all but overshadowed the blessing of the resurrection.

However, in both cases, there was an understanding that somehow God was to deal bountifully with them in the near future...there was a hope founded upon the character of the Father Who had proved Himself to be compassionate, loving, kind, faithful and just. It was this prior knowledge that made the dark prison bearable...that provided the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. And it was this prior knowledge that enabled them to renounce their desire for self-sufficiency, put their trust in the goodness of God, and to depend on Him to do what He knew was best for them in His perfect timing.

Now, of course, this all sounds so easy...but as those of us who have found ourselves in dire straits know all too well, dark, dank prisons, whether physical, spiritual, emotional, mental or even financial, have a way of making us extremely forgetful. The caves and gardens of our lives become the only reality we know and pretty soon we begin to think

and act like those who have no hope at all. It is at those times, dearest brethren, that the Word of God becomes a life-line, as it were...a rope to hold onto until we figure out which way is up...a life-jacket that keeps us afloat while the monstrous waves surge and swell all around us...especially those parts of God's Word that we have hidden in our hearts through memorization. Remember Joni Erickson Tada? The young Christian girl who was plunged into quadriplegia after diving into the bottom of Chesapeake Bay? She wrote later that all the time she was in traction and couldn't move at all, the only thing that kept her sane was the Word of God remembered from years of reciting the Prayer Book.

And so, even though his spirit was overwhelmed within him, David could say with conviction that God was his refuge. And Jesus knew that even though He was filled with horror as He faced the cross that night so many years ago that God's will was always best. And so we too know that even when we feel trapped by the circumstances of life our God is with us and He is good.

And we can know this because of what we are once more about to do...every time you feel abandoned...every time you feel imprisoned...every time you feel cornered...or helpless or hopeless or friendless...then remember the Eucharist. Remember that God was did as He had promised...remember that God did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves...and then ask yourself, if He did this for me on that awful cross, would He forsake me now?

So, dearest brethren, as you come to partake of this fulfilled promise, ask Him to help you to daily prepare yourself for the dark days that may come your way some time in the future by making His Word part of your very being as surely as you now make the

images of His Body broken for you and His Blood shed for you part of your being. May you hunger for His Word, feast on His Word, inwardly digest His Word so that it may be your guide out of whatever prison you may yet find yourself buried in...

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