

Proper 25, Year A  
October 23, 2011  
**Psalm 90**

*O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days; (BCP, 504)*

This is part of the prayer that I said at North Cemetery (Sturbridge) yesterday as we said a final goodbye to Alden Hammond. This has been quite a year for parish funerals – seven since the beginning of the year – four of those since mid-August.

I can't think it purely by chance that the psalm appointed for today is Psalm 90. This psalm is one of the traditional psalms read at a funeral. If it is not read, we often sing "O God our help in ages past" which is a hymn paraphrase of the first 6 verses of this psalm. So we hear this psalm read or sung on an occasion when our minds are particularly open and sensitive because of grief and memory, perhaps guilt and regret. At funerals, more than at any other service we are likely to reflect on our own condition and destiny. Surely that is an underlying reason why people do not choose to attend a funeral even though the promise given to us as Christians – Resurrection – is a cornerstone of our faith.

Let's take this opportunity to boldly jump into the funeral psalm with both feet. This psalm addresses in various ways the question, In the sure knowledge of our death, what gives meaning to our time now? How should we understand our time from the perspective of that moment when our life is at an end?

On a couple of occasions I have been privileged to accompany the last leg (the 9<sup>th</sup> inning, as my dad would say) of a dying parish member. They are truly my teachers. That is a very intense time of reflection. Surely we all know that we will die sooner or later. How do we make sense of our own impending death and the death of our loved ones? This psalm speaks to this question quite clearly.

It begins with an introductory word about God (verses 1-2) and then moves to an extended statement about human mortality in the light of God's eternity and God's wrath (verses 3-10). Verse 12 begins a series of petitions that represent a view of what we can expect and ask of God for the limited time of our life.

This is such a helpful psalm to be given to us in this season of loss. I think we are all seeking a better understanding of our limited time on this earth.

Let me read once again the first 2 verses of this psalm.

- 1 Lord, you have been our refuge \*  
from one generation to another.
- 2 Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or the land and the earth were born, \*  
from age to age you are God.

These verses are a clue as to where we can and should begin the search for meaning in the time we are given. The starting point of our understanding rightly belongs outside of ourselves. The starting point is God. These verses give us a double word about God that

is awesome in its claim – awesome both in the breadth of the claim and in the way it instills in us both encouragement and awe.

Before ever we turn to think about our time, or as we think about our time, we are reminded of a prior reality – the time of God. This God who brought forth the universe, who was there before it came to be and will be there after it is gone, that God is our refuge. There is no moment in all of our time that we have not been in God's hands. God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. God is the One in whom we can ask the questions about our life in the face of death. It is so very important to center our life and death questions on the sovereignly creative and intensively personal God.

With that in mind, we move to the difficult, but very honest verses 3-10.

- 3 You turn us back to the dust and say, \*  
"Go back, O child of earth."
- 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday  
when it is past \*  
and like a watch in the night.
- 5 You sweep us away like a dream; \*  
we fade away suddenly like the grass.
- 6 In the morning it is green and flourishes; \*  
in the evening it is dried up and withered.
- 7 For we consume away in your displeasure; \*  
we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation.
- 8 Our iniquities you have set before you, \*  
and our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
- 9 When you are angry, all our days are gone; \*  
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.
- 10 The span of our life is seventy years,  
perhaps in strength even eighty; \*  
yet the sum of them is but labor and sorrow,  
for they pass away quickly and we are gone.

In these verses the psalmist speaks about human life lived in the presence of God. As I said in the funeral sermon yesterday – “We must either run with God and trust His promises or eventually we will run into Him.” Our life is clearly limited. We must perceive that fact and deal with it as such. One of the great human self-deceptions is to think of our time as unlimited when, in fact, as this psalm reminds us, our time is short. Our finitude and mortality are not accidents, but arise out of the will and purposes of God, who both limits our days and judges them for their sin. In this matter we have to deal with God.

It means that the One who is the ground of our being has created us for lives that manifest love and righteousness. God created us to further the good purposes for which God has brought this universe into being. Our failure as individuals and communities so to live place our lives under the limitation and judgment of death. Deep down we know the truth of our failure.

And so, we find ourselves on our knees in prayer to the God of the universe who loves us so much. In prayer we anticipate that God will help us find meaning for life in the certainty of death.

- 12 So teach us to number our days \*  
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.
- 14 Satisfy us by your loving-kindness in the morning; \*  
so shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.
- 15 Make us glad by the measure of the days that you afflicted us \*  
and the years in which we suffered adversity.
- 16 Show your servants your works \*  
and your splendor to their children.
- 17 May the graciousness of the LORD our God be upon us; \*  
prosper the work of our hands;  
prosper our handiwork.

*O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days;*