



June 6th

THE NEW SHOFAR

***We live and we die in the presence of God
I love God because He is listening to my entreaties***

Psalm 119 and the First Fleet

On February 3rd 1788, the Reverend Richard Johnson gathered a small group of convicts and others under a large tree and offered prayers of thanksgiving. They thanked God for their safe arrival after some eight months of sea travel. The key reading for that gathering was **Psalm 116**, the same we use for today's Eucharist. His focus was on verses 12-14 which ask questions pertinent to their situation – how shall I give thanks to God for the divine protection under which I have been living? After all of the trials and tribulations of that terrible trip, and facing further challenging tests in the months and years to come, Richard Johnson asked the key question: *What humble responses can we make to give thanks to Yahweh for the generosity with which I am blessed?*

I love Yahweh because He has heard

The psalmist reminds us of something we can easily forget: God is listening to us. While most translations render the text *because he has heard*, the Hebrew is much richer in meaning. Just because someone *hears* something does not mean they are *listening*. Many sounds in our lives are in the background. We hear them but they do not impinge on our lives, or bring about change. This is not the case with God.

A more faithful translation could be something such as *I love Yahweh because his is constantly listening to me*. God misses nothing. God is concerned about all that is happening to His faithful children. The psalm says this beautifully: *because God is inclining his ear to me...* This is, listening to us is part and parcel of the very nature of God. God is *turning his ear*, ensuring He misses nothing. This is another of those examples of God being a God-in-action. That *inclining* has always been there, is with us now and will continue through until the End. It is what God does. Who God is.

God initiates this relationship

In his Letters, John reminds us how the truly amazing thing about the love of God is how it flows to us regardless of our state in life and whether or not we love Him or accept Him as Lord. The Creator loves His creatures, those created in His own image and likeness. This is what the psalmist celebrates. His life is clearly filled with struggles and agonies. For him they were the equivalent of being *snared* by death, *encompassed* by death and seemingly under the spell of Sheol, the biblical place of darkness and

death. It is about as far from the presence of God as is possible. No wonder he feels the burden of *distress and anguish*.

Having painted a picture to which we can all relate, at least at some times in our lives, he then goes on to celebrate the gift of faith that is his. He knows God is *inclining His ear* and listening to his suffering. God is not indifferent. God is not too busy. God does not remember the sins and failings of this little one of His. This Jewish man knows and believes all of this and so he can *then call on the name of Yahweh*.

Note the use of the word then

The wonderful promises and reassurances found in the remainder of the psalm grow out of a faith-commitment to God. It is only when the man turns to Yahweh in faith and with confidence that something happens in his life. Not necessarily a resolution of his pain and suffering, but an empowering that enables him to see beyond the immediate. Only when he understands there is no way he can find enduring peace through his own efforts can he experience the balm of God's grace. The beginning of peace – or as the psalmist expresses it – the beginning of *rest* is to be found in Yahweh. Any other kind of consolation cannot last and will not restore the person to a fullness of life.

I walk before Yahweh in the land of the living.

All of this leads the psalmist to the conclusion that he is living out his daily existence *before Yahweh*. God is with him. It is God who *keeps his feet from stumbling*. He understands there is nothing passive in this relationship. God is not there like a shadow. God is active, doing things in our lives – even when we might be tempted to think He is absent. He knows the truth of revelation: living or dying, *he is precious in the eyes of Yahweh*. That is our message for today, not just for ourselves but for the wider world. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are *precious*. Precious beyond our works, our successes and failures. We begin *precious* and remain *precious*. Whatever the world throws up at us, through it all, light and darkness, we are *precious*.

How do we come to an understanding of the wisdom of this psalmist? He tells us how: *I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of Yahweh*. The cup of salvation that is lifted up is the outpouring of the blood of Jesus on the cross. It is by living in the shadow of the cross that wisdom is to be experienced. He does not do this on his own but does so *in the presence of all his people* – in community worship. It is when the people of God come together to share the Word and to break bread (the Eucharist) that the fullness of God is most fully revealed. It does not matter who we are, for it is as God's precious children, in the death of Jesus that we are made worthy to take the cup and to eat the bread, to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. Therein is life.

The Psalm ends on the glorious and reassuring revelation. Work and play, praying and at worship, we live and die in the *courts of the house of Yahweh*. In God's presence. As we move out of our Sunday worship into a new week, this is how we are to proceed. We deal with all those we meet, and every circumstance, knowing we are living in God.