

Seek

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Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find in it none other than the way of life and peace,

Today, for what I think is the first time ever, I have not one but two texts for you.
The first is from the prophet Isaiah chapter 55 and verse 6:

‘Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near.’

The second is from Psalm 63 and verse 1:

‘O God, you are my God: eagerly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you.’

Are you good at grammar ? Living in France, speaking French, or to be more precise, trying to speak French, requires a certain grasp of grammar in order to get by. The grammar of most languages has common features: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to name but four. Verbs are doing words. There are different tenses, different moods. They can be active or passive, singular or plural, in the first, second or third person. And there is, of course, the imperative: ‘do this’; ‘don’t do that’ – they are commands, injunctions, orders.

Today's twin texts have one word in common – 'seek'. But grammatically speaking, though they are the same sound and the same spelling, they are different parts of the verb 'to seek'. Isaiah is using an imperative: he is telling us in no uncertain terms to do something – i.e. to seek out God. The Psalmist is using the present tense in 1st person singular to describe an action in which he is presently engaged – i.e. he is seeking God. And that, my friends, is today's sermon and you can now go to sleep if you want to while I briefly, over the next five minutes, explore and contrast the two texts.

In Isaiah, there is a real sense of urgency. We are in the present but we know that time passes. We know there is a past and we hope there will be a future. But here and now, we only have the present and this is the time to be doing. And what we should be doing, according to Isaiah, is to be seeking out God while he is still to be found. There are two underlying assumptions here. The first I find most encouraging: that the God we seek can be found. Our God is not a god who is playing hide and seek with us; our God is Emmanuel – God with us. He is there for us and, if we are looking for him, we can and we will find him. Great ! But the second assumption is that this may not always be the case. There may come a time when we are no longer able to find him. I'm not sure that God has withdrawn from us but it may be that we are no longer able to see him or no longer fit enough to find him. My eye-sight is not as good as it once was when I had no need of glasses nor am I as fit as I once was as an 18-year-old schoolboy playing rugby for the 1st XV. Isaiah's command is clear: do it now while it can still be done. How wise !

Hebrew poetry often uses parallels to make the point more strongly, more clearly. And in the second half of our text from Isaiah 55 v6, we hear this parallel statement, equally urgent as the first: 'call upon him while he is near.' We are being enjoined to speak to God now, to pray to him now while he is near enough to listen to us, to hear what we are saying to him. Now in a way that's silly – nonsense to be honest – because, by definition, God is everywhere and he is always up-close-and-personal but though he is ever present, it may be us that have closed down and have withdrawn from him so that though he is still there, he goes unnoticed by us. So the message is again clear: we should be trying to set up in prayer a conversation with God while we are still able to feel close enough to him for us to be able to hear him.

In the opening verse of Psalm 61 we read:

'O God, you are my God: eagerly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you.'

The Psalmist writes as if he has already taken Isaiah's advice – which given that the psalm was probably written before the passage in Isaiah might be a little difficult. That said, the psalmist can assert that God is his God and that he is actively and eagerly seeking to find his God. It is the two images of desire that illustrate how much the psalmist longs for the presence of God in his life that I personally find so exciting. Both are images of bodily need: the one for drink; the other for food. The psalmist thirsts for God and only by drinking of the living water that God provides can he be truly refreshed. The psalmist's hungers for God, feeling faint for lack of spiritual food, the bread of heaven or spiritual manna

that God alone can give. With thirst quenched and hunger satisfied, the search for God has not been in vain.

We have come to church today. Is it because we are seeking God ? Certainly, in the service, not least in drinking the wine and in eating the bread, we can meet the God we seek.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

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G: Sermon 27 : Seek

