

Psalm 49

1. *Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all you that dwell in the world.*
2. *You of low or high degree, both rich and poor together.*
3. *My mouth shall speak of wisdom
and my heart shall meditate on understanding.*
4. *I will incline my ear to a parable; I will unfold my riddle with the lyre.*
5. *Why should I fear in evil days,
when the malice of my foes surrounds me,*
6. *Such as trust in their goods
and glory in the abundance of their riches?*
7. *For no one can indeed ransom another
or pay to God the price of deliverance.*
8. *To ransom a soul is too costly; there is no price one could pay for it,*
9. *So that they might live for ever, and never see the grave.*
10. *For we see that the wise die also; with the foolish and ignorant they
perish and leave their riches to others.*
11. *Their tomb is their home for ever, their dwelling through all
generations, though they call their lands after their own names.*
12. *Those who have honour, but lack understanding,
are like the beasts that perish.*
13. *Such is the way of those who boast in themselves,
the end of those who delight in their own words.*
14. *Like a flock of sheep they are destined to die;
death is their shepherd; they go down straight to the Pit.*
15. *Their beauty shall waste away,
and the land of the dead shall be their dwelling.*
16. *But God shall ransom my soul; from the grasp of death will he take me.*
17. *Be not afraid if some grow rich and the glory of their house increases,*
18. *For they will carry nothing away when they die,
nor will their glory follow after them.*
19. *Though they count themselves happy while they live*

and praise you for your success,

*20. They shall enter the company of their ancestors
and will nevermore see the light.*

*21. Those who have honour, but lack understanding,
are like the beasts that perish.*

Refrain

Hear this, all you peoples;

listen, all you who dwell in the world.

Psalm 49 is a wisdom psalm, in which a wisdom teacher calls all people to consider a universal problem. He asks how one can trust in God when the wicked prosper and use their power to exploit the weak. (vv.5 and 6, 'Why should I fear in evil days, when the malice of my foes surrounds me. Such as trust in their goods and glory in the abundance of their riches?')

The psalmist has received an answer, which he has put into a poem to the accompaniment of a lyre (v.4).

The teacher says that equality can be achieved only by thinking about the common fate of people. Rich people cannot buy an escape from death. (v.7) Death is the great leveller. It makes all people equal, whether they be wise or foolish, and brings them to the same permanent home. (v. 10, 'For we see that the wise die also; with the foolish and ignorant they perish and leave their riches to others.')

Led by death (v.14), like sheep by a shepherd, without their possessions, they go to the Pit, the underworld. 'Like a flock of sheep, they are destined to die; death is their shepherd; they go down straight to the Pit.'

There is a faint hint of immortality in vv.15 and 16. Money cannot get a person out of the Pit, but God may ransom him; the psalmist does not know how. But even beyond the grave he will be in communion with God. (v.16. 'But God shall ransom my soul; from the grasp of death will he take me.')

There is a similar idea in Psalm 73, 'Yet I am always with you; you hold me by your right hand. You will guide me with your counsel and afterwards receive me with glory.'

We sometimes say, 'You can't take it with you', and Psalm 49 shows that, as human beings, we do tend to worry about wealth and possessions. The psalm urges us to seek God's wisdom; and Jesus said to his listeners in the Sermon on the Mount, 'But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

So, it is a matter of getting it all in perspective and in the right proportion. We were once burgled at our house in Aylesbury, and my mum didn't over-react. She said, 'It's only possessions.' I think that she was glad that they hadn't damaged the house. It put it all into perspective.

Prayer

O Almighty God,
whose blessed Son called Matthew the tax-collector
to be an apostle and evangelist:
give us grace to forsake the selfish pursuit of gain
and the possessive love of riches

that we may follow in the way of your Son Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

(Collect for St. Matthew's Day)