

God's eternity and our mortality

(Psalm 90: 1-12, and Revelation 21: 1-6)

When I was told that the theme of this year's meeting was "Time", the first quotation that I thought of was not from the Bible but from a hymn. This quotation reads:

Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.

Against that image of the transience of human life, the hymn sets the eternal being of God: its first verse reads:

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home;

That hymn has been described as probably one of the two "best-known sacred poems in the English language" (*Watson R, Trickett K eds. "Companion to 'Hymns and Psalms'", Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988: 605*). In Britain, it is often sung on official occasions such as acts of remembrance for those killed in war. Its author, Isaac Watts, published it in 1719 under the title "Man frail and God eternal" in a book entitled "The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament". It is based on the first part of Psalm 90, which is the first of two passages from the Bible that we are to reflect on now.

The eternal nature of God is highlighted in the first two verses of the Psalm and in verse 4:

"LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God... For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night."

The very first word of that quotation – LORD – is of course a translation of the Hebrew word Yahweh, the Name which the book of Exodus tells us was the answer Moses got when he met God at the burning bush and asked his Name (*Exodus 3:15*). That name Yahweh (*YHWH*) is I understand a hybrid of the Hebrew words for "He is" (*hwh*) and "He will be" (*yhyh*); and as a prelude to telling Moses this Name God used words which can be translated "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE" (*Exodus 3:14*). At our Metz meeting last year, Philippe Lernould led a Bible study of that story, in which he quoted Martin Buber's paraphrase of God's words to Moses: "I am there ... I am, I will be, and I will remain present." God transcends time. For God, the tense is in some sense irrelevant: the present includes the past and the future, and so in John's gospel we read of God incarnate in Jesus as saying "Before Abraham was born, I AM" (*John 8:58*). Equally, is not God saying to us today "When the big bang happened nearly 14 thousand million years ago, I AM"? and "When the Universe as you know it comes to an end, I AM". That is, in effect, what the psalmist said of God: "from everlasting to everlasting, you are God."

The psalmist also said that God was "our dwelling place in all generations". Isaac Watts paraphrased this as "our eternal home" in his hymn. In other words, we live in God. "In him we live and move and have our being" (*Acts 17:28*) as St Paul said, quoting from the Greek poet Epimenides in his speech to the intellectuals of Athens. (Incidentally, I was interested to discover recently that Epimenides, and also Aratus, the other poet whom Paul quoted in that speech, were speaking explicitly of the Greek god Zeus; so when Paul quoted those two poets approvingly, he was acknowledging that in their worship of Zeus they had caught glimpses of the true God, even though many of their ideas about God were wrong – rather as some of us would claim that many followers of other faiths today have caught at least glimpses of the true God.)

From what the psalmist goes on to say, he seems to have caught only a glimpse of what it means to affirm that God is our dwelling-place, the One in whom we live, the Ground of our being. This faith does not seem to have given him any deep sense of security as he reflected on the troubles that the passage of time can bring. When his focus switches from the eternity of God to the frailty of humanity, it is the insecurity of life that he stresses. Verses 3, 5, 6 and 10 read:

"You turn us back to dust, and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.' ... You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. ... The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away."

These words seem to imply that death equals extinction, and that even the lives of those who survive to old age – a minority in the psalmist’s time – count for little. His suggestion that we are like a dream is echoed in William Shakespeare’s play ‘The Tempest’, when Prospero says that “We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep” (*The Tempest act 4, scene 1, lines 156-8*). If anything, the psalmist’s view of death is even more negative. He fails to acknowledge that death does not destroy the value of the life it ends, and that it may sometimes be welcome, as the author of the book of Job implied when he wrote that in the sleep of death “the weary are at rest ... and the slaves are free from their masters” (*Job 3:17, 19*).

The psalmist says nothing as positive as this, but goes on to suggest that death is God’s punishment for human sin: in verses 7-9 and 11, he says that:

“We are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. ... Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you.”

Repeatedly, the psalmist implies that our mortality is a manifestation of God’s wrath, God’s anger at the sinfulness of the whole human race or of those with whom the psalmist believed our race began, Adam and Eve. Verse 3, which I read earlier, seems to refer back very definitely to the story of their sin. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which I am using, that verse is translated “You turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals’”; but I understand that the last two words could more literally be translated “You children of Adam”. And the words “You turn us back to dust” echo what the book of Genesis quotes as God’s final words when sentencing Adam for his disobedience: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (*Genesis 3:19*).

Many of us would probably question this idea of death as something inflicted on us deliberately by a bad-tempered God as punishment for us or our ancestors being disobedient to him. We would accept that the ways in which we humans abuse the freedom God has given us are to blame for many deaths, including deaths due to violence, to unhealthy life styles, and to our failure to do all we can to help those in need and to manage the world’s resources for the good of all. We might say that these deaths are among the penalties we pay for taking no notice of the laws of nature and human rights – laws that we as people of faith believe are God’s laws – and that the reason why these penalties are not only paid by those who break the laws is that we are all parts of one community. But these penalties happen, surely, not because God is bad-tempered but because he is dependable – because if there were no laws there would be no order in the universe.

Also, I suspect that death would still be part of the human condition even if everyone did honour the laws of nature and human rights. The death rate would be lower; expectation of life would be higher; but unless we became able to prevent ageing, our bodies would still wear out in the end.

Whether or not we share the psalmist’s view that human sin is to blame for all death, we may all find food for thought in a prayer to God which this view leads him to offer. This prayer is in verse 12. In the New Revised Standard Version, it is translated:

“So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”

In another modern translation, the Revised English Bible, it reads:

“So make us know how few are our days, that our minds may find wisdom.”

In other words, we are to ask God to make us aware of the passage of time, since such awareness can enrich our minds. The psalmist doesn’t say why this should be so, but may I suggest two reasons and invite you to think of others.

Firstly, we should be thankful to God for our time on earth. For me, and I hope for each of you, the bad times in my life have been vastly outnumbered by the good times, times when it has been good to be alive. As we pass through such times we should relish and enjoy and thank God for them, and not let them be spoilt by thoughts of bad times past or future.

Secondly, an awareness that our time on earth is limited and diminishing challenges us to spend this precious resource wisely and not squander it; and one of our top priorities should be to devote time to enriching the lives of those who experience more bad times and fewer good ones than we do.

We'll now leave this Old Testament view of God's eternity and our mortality, and turn briefly to a New Testament view – one which anticipates the end of Time. At the beginning of chapter 21 of the book of Revelation, John writes:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’

“And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.’”

How do John's ideas of God's eternity and our mortality compare with the psalmist's? God's words as John quotes them – ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end’ – certainly echo the psalmist's words ‘From everlasting to everlasting you are God.’ Also, the voice John hears saying “God ... will dwell with” mortals reminds us of the opening words of the psalm, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations”, ‘though John's picture of God living with us is not perhaps as powerful as the psalmist's image of God as the One in whom we live.

John's thoughts on our mortality, however, are much more positive than the psalmist's. Whereas the psalmist sees death as final, John echoes the promise in Chapter 25 of the Book of Isaiah that God “will destroy ... the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever” and “will wipe away the tears from all faces” (*Isaiah 25:7-8*). These words encourage us to trust that, although our time on earth is limited by death, God's love for us does not cease at that time, but that God remains our “dwelling place” for eternity.