

Migration and Ministry Conference 7th September 2016

The following two reflections emerge out of papers presented at the conference on Migration and Ministry, held at Roehampton in September 2016. Paul Nzacahayo and Rachel Starr, colleagues at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, developed their papers out of an MA module on theology and migration that they co-teach. For both, the geography of migration came to be significant for their theological reflection, Paul in considering the forests of Rwanda, and Rachel in reflecting on the Mediterranean as barrier and meeting place. Migration is part of the social, liturgical and theology context at Queen's, with students, staff and visitors gathering from many nations, and the chapel often being a space in which, through preaching and prayer, the vulnerability, resilience and gift of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are held before God.

River deep, mountain high - Rachel Starr

Psalm 42.5-11

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock,
'Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?'
¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Reflection

Psalm 42 and 43 are generally read as one psalm, held together by a refrain which appears three times. Thus this passage is located mid-way through a longer lament, and bracketed by persistent proclamations of hope (v 5 and v 11; and again in Psalm 43.5).¹

The psalm ranges from the heights of praise to the depths of despair. While written in a different place and time, it provokes a number of reflections about the experience of migration and of journeying with God.

In the verses considered, the psalmist laments being at a distance from things longed for: community, familiar landscapes, places of worship, even God. The psalmist is far from home, whether spiritually or geographically. They feel cut off from their roots, and in danger; sensing 'murder in their bones' as one translation puts it.² There is no-one who knows them (or their God) and, without recognition, their identity begins to fade. As poet Sandra Castillo remembers, as a girl having recently left Cuba to live in the United States:

'on this, our first Christmas,
away from ourselves.'³

The experience of being 'away from oneself' is a common one for many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who often, like the psalmist, live at a distance from all that is known to them, and all those who know them in their depths. To remember familiar places, people and beliefs is in some way to resist the loss of self that many experience. The psalmist knows this well: 'therefore I remember you' is their gut response to despair (v 6). And this remembering returns them to the source of being – to God: who draws up mountains, causes springs to flow, and whose voice echoes through the mighty, turbulent seas.

The waters of the depths flood the biblical canon: from the waters of chaos, out of which God brings about land and life, to the deep wells of faith; from the seas through which God brings the people into freedom, to the waters of death that drag one into the watery depths. Threat, life-spring, creation, encounter: all these aspects of the watery imagery are present in Psalm 42. So it is for the many fleeing conflict and poverty today, who set out from the shores of the Mediterranean, risking death but seeking: peace, bread, friendship - all that brings life. While far too often a place of death, these waters, that both separate and connect Europe and Africa, have the potential to be a place of encounter and recognition.

Prayer

Day and night
at home and far away
'river deep, mountain high'⁴
God is near.
Let us hope in God,
and offer that hope to all who seek life. Amen

¹ The psalm is not central to the lectionary readings, appearing once each year as part of a series of readings during the Easter Vigil (in the Revised Common Lectionary). One hymn in *Singing the Faith* based on Psalm 42.

² Robert Alter's translation of verse 10.

³ Sandra M. Castillo, "Christmas, 1970" from *My Father Sings, to My Embarrassment* (White Pine Press, 2002)

⁴ Tina Turner, 1966

The God of the Forest and those who flee into it - Paul Nzacahayo

Genesis 2:7-9 (NRSV)

⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Reflection

The writer of Genesis 2:7-9 is keen to point out that trees here reveal the nature of God's graciousness,⁵ in that their origin and existence are intimately connected to the life and wellbeing of other living creatures, humans in particular. The man and woman are formed out of the ground from which trees emerge and grow.

The tree of life and that of knowledge can be metaphors to the various aspects in which forests fulfil divine intent such as healing, food, protection and shelter; but also some not so divine purpose, when they are a source of danger. Humans, called to roam free in this vastness of God's grace - also symbolised by the absence of physical boundaries - will need to be mindful of this physical and spiritual danger.⁶

It is against this duality of purposes that one can also relate to forests in Rwanda. During the genocide, forests, both in northern Rwanda and Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, welcomed hundreds of thousands of people who were fleeing and found themselves seeking safety in them regardless of class, ethnic origin, or wealth. As one survivor of the genocide put it, 'we were very scared, but then we got to the forest, and we felt safer'.⁷

Despite their chaotic nature, these forests were also places of connectivity where people on the move found greater commonality, as they all relied on what forests provided for food, shelter and medicine.

In the vastness of the forests, their openness to the public and their boundary-less nature, one can relate to their sacredness, both in the way the trees helped protect the migrating population but also how they enabled the people to make that spiritual journey towards one another and deep into the heart of God. The forests were quite often places where criminals would have to face God, but also places where victims would find God's presence.

In this sense forests are able to hold together the diversity that moves and lives in them; a diversity that reminds us of life in the Jungle Camp in Calais across the channel – recently dismantled – where life of migrants was held in transition; a place of chaos, uncertainty and danger; but also a place of hope, possibilities and transformation.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 45.

⁶ Joseph Sebarenzi, *God sleeps in Rwanda. A Journey of Transformation*, New York: Atria Books, 2009, p. 33.

⁷ <http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/loss-trees-loss-livelihood>

Prayer

God Maker of trees and forests

Help us to be eager to discover the mysteries

hidden deep in them,

to connect to their language when they praise you;

to listen to them when they tell of

your grace and boundless love and mercy.

Bless our forests, all that is nurtured by them;

all that live and move within them.

We pray for all who seek refuge in forests;

may they encounter your presence there. Amen