

The Stab in the Back—Psalm 54

Gerard Mackrell

O God, listen to my prayer,
do not hide from my pleading,
attend to me and reply;
with my cares, I cannot rest.

I tremble at the shouts of the foe,
at the cries of the wicked;
for they bring down evil upon me.
They assail me with fury.

My heart is stricken within me,
death's terror is on me,
trembling and fear fall upon me
and horror overwhelms me.

O that I had wings like a dove
to fly away and be at rest.
So I would escape far away
and take refuge in the desert.

I would hasten to find a shelter
from the raging wind,
from the destructive storm, O Lord,
and from their plotting tongues.

For I can see nothing but violence
and strife in the city.
Night and day they patrol
high on the city walls.

It is full of wickedness and evil;
it is full of sin.
Its streets are never free
from tyranny and deceit.

If this had been done by an enemy
I could bear his taunts.
If a rival had risen against me,
I could hide from him.

But it is you, my own companion,
my intimate friend!
How close was the friendship between us.
We walked together in harmony in the house of God . . .

As for me, I will cry to God
and the Lord will save me.
Evening, morning and at noon
I will cry and lament.

He will deliver my soul in peace
in the attack against me;
for those who fight me are many,
but he hears my voice.

God will hear and will humble them,
the eternal judge:
for they will not amend their ways.
They have no fear of God.

The traitor has turned against his friends;
he has broken his word.
His speech is softer than butter,
but war is in his heart.
His words are smoother than oil,
but they are naked swords.

Entrust your cares to the Lord
and he will support you.
He will never allow
the just man to stumble.

But you, O God, will bring them down
to the pit of death.
Deceitful and bloodthirsty men shall not live half their days.
O Lord, I will trust in you.¹

'Et tu, Brute'! Shakespeare has immortalised the death of Julius Caesar with these oft-quoted words. He may not have been historically accurate but what he puts into Caesar's last gasp contains a deep psychological truth. So does what follows: 'Then die, Caesar'! Some may see in this a dash of melodrama and self-pity, as they may in this psalm. There are those who remain theatrical to the end; Saint Thomas More was one of them. Yet Caesar's words may be more than this. 'Then die, Caesar'! may mean that Caesar was dead already. There seems to be more sadness and disillusionment in his words than contempt or anger. He is emotionally murdered before the 'coup de grâce'. What is

¹Psalm 54 (55) in the Grail version, quoted with permission from *The Prayer of the Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970.

there now to live for? It is not unknown for wives to submit resignedly to attempts on their lives by husbands who love another.

In the famous funeral oration Mark Anthony points to the tear made by Brutus in Caesar's cloak with the words: 'This was the most unkindest cut of all'. Those unfamiliar with Shakespearean language may see grammatical exaggeration in the double superlative and emotional understatement in the use of 'unkindest'. Today, indeed, 'unkindest' would be totally inadequate. Yet in 'King Lear' we see 'kind' and its various combinations as carrying a stronger meaning than it does today. It meant 'nature' or 'natural', and 'unkind' meant 'unnatural' or 'monstrous'. Something against the whole order of nature. An animal's behaviour is governed by its kind or species. A pig cannot fly. Nor can a daughter be ungrateful. Or so thought Lear. Then, uncushioned by his kingship, he discovers otherwise. The reversal of nature drives him mad and makes him pray that cosmic nature will undergo an upheaval and that the storm will crush the rotundity of the earth. Stripped of his kingship, he strips himself of his clothes and dares the elements to do their worst. The pathetic naked old man on the wasted heath is indeed a 'poor, bare, forked animal'. His clothes were his 'lendings', as was his kingship. In himself he was nothing. For those whom he imagined to have loved him wanted him out of the way. The rich and famous have been driven to suicide by this painful realisation. The more balanced have retreated to cold cynicism. Lear had been 'more sinned against than sinning', but he had sinned. He had in a fit of pique banished the only daughter who had truly loved him. But his faults were no excuse for the treatment he received. As Cassius said to Brutus, 'A friend would not notice such things'.

'The most unkindest cut'. Kind, as I said, means nature. But it means more than that. It includes the bond of nature, the blood-bond. 'Man-kind' is the brotherhood of man. The German 'Kind' means child, offspring, the continuation of the species. As an adjective the English 'kind' describes no very strong affection but rather something more fundamental. It means to be pleasant and sympathetic to another of the same species. It still clings to something of the meaning of the blood-bond. To be 'kind', therefore, is etymologically not a virtue but an inevitable consequence of being human. Then came original sin, some ghastly disharmony, and it is now natural for us to be unnatural.

To appreciate this fully we must make the familiar distinction between what is natural and what is instinctive, between feelings which are controlled by reason and conscience and those which are not. We must, however, be careful when we speak of control. The most selfish, unnatural and unkind people often have their feelings under the most rigid control. Indeed it could be said that they display hardly any feelings at all. Some will follow the instinctual urge of a moment of selfish passion; some, however, will calmly ignore the needs of others with an indifference that is almost ascetical. Indeed most unkindness is seen as a lack of feeling. To such egoists the reason is as blind as it is in the impetuous and passionate. At certain levels it simply cannot function.

Appeals to decency, concern for others, are unintelligible. Like flying saucers. Erasmus sums them up in his 'Praise of Folly' :

'By the immortal gods, is there any sort of man more happy than those who get called morons, fools, idiots, and turnips—names, in my view, of great splendour? At first sight I may seem to be talking absurd nonsense, but it will soon appear to be the entire truth. First of all they do not seem to feel the fear of death; no little evil in all conscience. . . . They know neither shame nor fear nor ambition nor envy nor love. And lastly, if they come closer to the stupidity of beasts, they cannot sin according to the theologians' (*Renaissance and Reformation*, Edited by G. R. Elton, Cambridge, Macmillan, 1963, page 67).

Psalm 54 shows the bewilderment of one who has suffered from such idiots and turnips. Unlike Erasmus he cannot view the situation with humorous cynicism. He is shattered.

'If this had been done by an enemy

I could bear his taunts . . .

But is is you, my own companion,

My intimate friend!

How close was the friendship between us'!

'Was'. The past tense is significant in more ways than one. The obvious meaning is the nostalgia which comes from thinking of a past happiness which has not continued into the present. But the bitterness and unhappiness of these words may mean to the reader something that the psalmist did not intend. Was there ever a close friendship even before the betrayal? If there had been, could such a betrayal have taken place? We all think, on such occasions, that there was a close friendship, and it is precisely this that makes the breaking off of ties seem a betrayal. We think of intimate words and actions, smiles, mannerisms, intense familiarity and delightful trust. After this the callous ending seems unbelievable. The first shock passes, though we think it never will, and either a new friendship is formed or we retreat into cynicism and emotional suicide. There was a very narrow gap between the suicide and homicide of Caesar, but gap there was.

In reading this psalm, however, we might do well to consider what part we play in such events. George Meredith, in *The Egoist* (which he subtitles a Comedy), makes a most penetrating study of selfishness and friendship, none the less subtle for the humour which plays throughout. Sir Willoughby is the arch-egoist who, constantly flattered by sycophants in his youth, suffers endless agony at not being adored by those whom he despises. Even the gradual desertion by his friends mystifies rather than enlightens him. Humiliation never becomes humility. It is hard to read this novel without feeling for Willoughby; for it is hard not to identify ourselves with him. Perhaps we are turnips on the allotment of Erasmus. What we see as a sudden betrayal may be the result of a gradual reaction to our own moronic selfishness. We have expected too much of others and forgotten to give as well as take. The luxury of self-pity is seen in the escapism which makes a brief appearance in the psalm :

'O that I had wings like a dove
to fly away and be at rest.
So I would escape far away
And take refuge in the desert.
I would hasten to find a shelter
from the raging wind'

This Innisfree mood is to be found in all third-rate Romantic poetry, and even Gerard Manley Hopkins, the gutsy and heroic realist, lapsed into it in an absurdly romantic view of the religious profession of a nun. In his 'Heaven-Haven' we read :

'I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
Where flies no sharp and sided hail,
And a few lilies blow'

I'd like to bet that the nun who inspired these lines lived long enough to detest such drivel. Our psalmist, however, indulges in the same unrealism: 'We would walk together in harmony in the house of God'. There it is! The whiff of incense, the cloistral gloom, the candles, and 'Sweet Saviour, bless us e'er we go-o'. We are all prone to it, of course, although our aesthetic sense may take a different direction. And there is a possibility that I might be judging the psalmist harshly. He may have meant something entirely different and it is perhaps time to consider what this might be.

The friendship he refers to is linked to the Temple, and it seems to be sealed by its association with the house of God. He and his friend walked in harmony in the presence of God, as if that presence either created or maintained the friendship. It is as if the friendship were a kind of sacrament. Which, in a way, is what all friendship is. For if a sacrament is a sign of God's love, then human love is clearly such a sign, as St. John stresses in his Gospel and Epistles. It would be a mistake to think of marriage as the only kind of friendship which is sacramentalised. It is not. First of all there is baptism. By being born into the family of redeemed humanity we receive the sacrament of brotherhood and sisterhood with the rights and obligations of family love. According to St John and St Paul all friendship is sacramentalised and the breaking of it some kind of sacrilege. We are, of course, using the word 'sacrament' in a non-technical sense, but it is none the less valid for that.

'The traitor has turned against his friends;
he has broken his word.
His speech is softer than butter,
But war is in his heart.
His words are smoother than oil,
But they are naked swords'.

Why this treason and hypocrisy took place we are not told. Some commentators thought that the psalm was composed by David and that he was referring to the treachery of Achitophel. Since, however, there was no Temple during the reign of David, this seems to be ruled out. Unless bits and pieces were added later—not unusual in the psalms. However,

the historical background is usually irrelevant, particularly when it interferes with personal meditation! What we can say for certain is that treachery is for personal gain, even if that gain be revenge. But usually it is for wealth or ambition. We may now re-visit English Literature.

Shakespeare's Shylock and Marlowe's Jew of Malta, not to mention Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale', antedate Dickens's Fagin by a few centuries in their anti-Semitism, but Shylock is useful to illustrate our point, as are the others. Playing to an anti-Semitic gallery in a country which had expelled all Jews a couple of centuries earlier and had had more than its share of pogroms, Shakespeare makes Shylock rage about the loss of his daughter and his ducats, seemingly in a conflict as to which was more precious. In a more honest mood he makes the Jew say: 'If you prick us, do we not bleed'? Indeed they do. Portia ingeniously defied Shylock to take his pound of flesh without shedding blood, but Shylock had bled in his heart for years. Driven to the ghetto, he was forced to use his curse-cum-blessing of money-lending to establish his precarious place in society. The Gentile Silas Marner, unjustly accused of theft, also drew his confidence from gold. Disillusioned, hating mankind, he would gaze at the yellow which never tarnished. When his gold was stolen he was an empty shell. And then the golden head of an orphan child lay on his fire-rug and he began to live as a human being. He lived because he loved.

Ian Fleming, in very mortal prose, has informed us that diamonds are for ever. A song tells that they are also a girl's best friend, but only because of a cynical awareness that their beauty outlasts that of the body they adorn. The psalmist, however, prefers anger to cynicism and in the good Old Testament tradition works it off by calling on the vengeance of God.

'But you, O God, will bring them down
to the pit of death.

Deceitful and bloodthirsty men shall not live half their days'.

Mild stuff compared to the imprecatory psalms. And our poet reacts more positively by seeking refuge in God, who is not fickle like his erstwhile friend.

'As for me, I will cry to God
and the Lord will save me . . .
He will deliver my soul in peace
in the attack against me'.

In another psalm (61) there is a similar contrast between the unreliability of human friendship and the steadfastness of God.

'Rest in God alone, my soul!
He is the source of my hope;
with him alone for my rock, my safety,
my fortress, I can never fall;
rest in God, my safety, my glory,
the rock of my strength'.

This turning to God can be a natural reaction as well as a supernatural

inspiration. It can be an act of cynicism as well as of conversion. But, of course, God is indeed a rock and men are like grass. Certain circles refer to diamonds as 'rocks' for the reason mentioned earlier. God is even more permanent. But so is man, and we should remember that. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem 'Nature an Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection', sees man as perishable and combustible in the burning energy of nature. Even his deeply engraved 'fire-dint' on life will be erased, his 'mark on mind is gone'. But when the fire has burned itself out and the embers collapse into cold ashes, behold, there is that shining diamond dazzling us! It is man, the 'immortal diamond'. There are immortal diamonds everywhere. One in every man. Hammer away hard enough and you will strike it. Lear was not alone. The faithful Kent, disguised, followed him and served him. And followed him to the grave :

'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;
My master calls me; I must not say no'.

There are such people everywhere and we must beware lest our turning to God should be an excuse for turning away from man.

'Entrust your cares to the Lord
and he will support you.
He will never allow
the just man to stumble'.

So far so good. Apart from a hint of priggishness to the modern ear. But what about the following?

'But you, O God, will bring them down
to the pit of death.

Deceitful and bloodthirsty men shall not live half their days.

O Lord, I will trust in you'.

By all means. But less of the curses. He who says he loves God whom he does not see and doesn't love man, even his enemy, whom he does see, is a liar. But St John oversimplifies. He does not make it clear that a man can deceive himself. That he may not know that he hates his fellow men. He may not be a liar but merely an embittered fool. We must allow for a period of anger and bitterness, but only until dusk. Even Jesus allows us that. But then calmness must steal over us, and with it forgiveness. The blood of humanity must once more be allowed to flow through us and carry away the clot of hatred. Psychologically as well as spiritually we cannot hate man and love God. And it is self-torture to pretend that we hate those we really love. Their treachery, real or imagined, cannot make us turn off our love as we can turn off a tap. Only if we realise this do the following words make sense :

'He will deliver my soul *in peace*'.