

## **“Change starts with me”**

Text: Ps. 42:1-5

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:1-5 NIV)

### **The Message**

The text is a lament, a wrestling, a struggle borne from the experience of the author, which emphasizes the pain, anguish and cries of the men and women, boys and girls who have either been infected or affected by HIV. From the core of his/her being, deep within the recesses of the soul, the psalmist cries, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" (v5a). We are not sure who it was, some say that it was David during a particular time of depression, perhaps arising from the conflict with Absalom his son. To suggest this, however, would be an unnecessary speculation which is not provided for by the text. The inscription simply indicates that the text is to a particular leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.

As I read the text, there are several clues that help us to decipher what was causing the depression. In verses 1 and 2 we get the impression that there was a sense of Distance and Alienation. At some point in the author's life s/he began to struggle under the pressures of life. S/he became weighed down and burdened. S/he began to feel tired and empty. Not just tired and empty, but sad. Saddened to the point where s/he was not eating food. Many nights were spent weeping and wailing in desperation. "Where are you God?", "God why have you forgotten me". But there was only utter silence. Such silence can result in feelings of rejection and dejection. A sense that no one cares, that no one knows the sorrows I feel, that it is me and me alone in the wilderness.

But the author doesn't stop there, because I believe that contributing the author's depression were the tide of mockers and naysayers, hypocrites that are in the church. The author remembers with euphoria the moments of joy experienced in the presence of God, but joy turned into sadness resulting from the many persons around who

discouraged him/her from worshipping God. Perhaps they began speaking ill behind his or her back. Rumors were spreading and the church became a tough dark place to worship and fellowship.

But not only was there a sense of distance and alienation, not only was there a tide of mockers and naysayers, hypocrites that dissuaded him/her from attending church and losing joy, but the author also experienced trials and hardships. Every time they tried to pick up the pieces and return to the stream, every time they got up, they got knocked back down. Trials and hardships kept coming not just from church members, but also from health practitioners, from family members and persons in the community.

This sobbing, lament, yearning, is a daily reality for many people of God who don't know their status, or who know their status but have not disclosed or who know their status and have disclosed but are now being 'stigmatized' and ostracized, by a society, by the very members of the church who should be demonstrating the love of God. It is a lament of the HIV positive person, who attempts to deal with his/her status by helping others to break the silence but is themselves going through the dilemma of dealing at times with the physical and emotional illness that arise.

But the text doesn't just sail over the negative experiences that tossed the author about. For the author recalls the experiences in God's house that s/he enjoys during the times of his/her depression. S/He purposefully recalls these particular experiences as it helps him/her to keep life in perspective. To recognize that even though none dealt with him/her as friend with friend, that even though s/he now stands alone, that in God they could continue to experience consolation and resolution. The deep within the author's soul called out to the deep within God.

Hope in God; his soul exclaimed, for I shall again praise God who is my help and my God.

- From this we can learn as a church that in the midst of depression the soul can find renewed consolation and resolution in God which is the catalyst for hope in our lives.
- We can learn that discrimination and other mitigating factors leads HIV positive persons away from the consolation and restoration that life with God can bring, even during great tribulation.

**What do we have to confess?**

- We can confess that as a community, we have contributed to the depressive state of those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS by discriminating based on our knee-jerk stigma. Which to a large extent arise out of some myths and misconceptions that we have resulting from our own socialisation.
- Those who are infected and affected by HIV too need to confess. To confess like the psalmist that we have not trusted completely in God's sustaining and motherly care as we really should.

Such a confession can lead to us being:

### **What can we be thankful for?**

- thankful that God understands our struggles, and deals patiently with us even when we are weary of dealing patiently with others and ourselves.
- thankful that in spite of our not trusting God in the midst of calamity, God searches us out, in the highways and byways, in the nooks and crannies to the very ends of the world, and draws us back to God's self
- thankful for the insatiable thirst our soul's have for God. As the Psalmist iterates, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."
- thankful for the unending flow of God's spirit which renews and strengthens us day by day
- and for God's reliability.

Arising out of this nostalgia, this catharsis, out of this thankfulness to God, those who are HIV positive:

### **What can we pray for?**

- To see within their depression the hope that Jesus offers of a consoled and resolute life in God, and
- A shift of focus which uses their own suffering as a conduit to inform and educate others

As a church, as members of the body of Christ who continually experience the transformative love of God embodied in the worthy example of Jesus who has commissioned us to work for justice and righteousness so that men and women, boys and girls everywhere who are affected and infected with HIV can experienced part of God's reigndom here on earth,

- We can pray for a society that is tolerant, empathetic and understanding that tends to the issues of stigma, discrimination, intolerance, violence and injustice faced by affected and infected persons.

Because Christ Jesus has died for all, and it is by his stripes that we are healed.

In the final analysis, such a one cannot afford to lose hope. And is not this why we are gathered here this morning? To be that ray of sunlight, that lighthouse, that channel of grace and beacon of hope which dares take a stand with those who are living with the human immunodeficiency virus, to support their families who experience various stages of rejection and dejection, to support national policies and hold the government accountable when it fails in practice to provide the necessary help and care through the Ministry of Health. And should we not also pledge ourselves to training persons in our communities and in particular our congregations equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to relate to, support and work alongside those among us who are infected and affected.

You too may want to commit to testing, to knowing your own status, being an activist, visiting or knowing one HIV positive person; perhaps you may even want to volunteer at the Missionaries of the Poor Faith Centre. However, I urge you to:

- 1) Treat your body and that of your partner with respect
- 2) Speak out against gender based violence and violence against children
- 3) Do something practical in the life of a person living with HIV

Such actions I believe will re-echo the message of hope that this seemingly despairing psalmist ends with in verse 5b; "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

May this hope sustain the church and all she represents! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.