

Talk 3

*In your deep floods drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye see sin, but through my tears.*

In the final verse of the hymn, the poet imagines that his unceasing tears have created a flood deep enough to drown all his faults and fears. These are tears of repentance, expressing a desire for a complete washing away. They remind us of the famous and familiar words of Psalm 51, written by King David as he faced his guilt over his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband: 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love ... *Wash away* all my iniquity, and *cleanse* me from my sin. *Cleanse* me with hyssop and I will be *clean*. *Wash me* and I will be whiter than snow. Like King David, Phineas Fletcher is experiencing his sin like a stain on his soul, like a film of grime around his heart. He longs to be cleansed, renewed and forgiven.

Fletcher would have been familiar with the Augustinian idea of praying for compunction - a word taken from the Latin, 'compungere', meaning 'to prick' or 'to sting'. What stings is the realisation that one has missed the mark through behaviour that falls short of truth, actions contrary to our calling. It is a holy sorrow that is brought about by the realization that we have turned away from God. It is a desire to repent and return to him. Augustine notes that compunction is accompanied by tears of remorse, the sign of a 'broken and contrite heart', taking us back to David again. Without compunction, there is no contrition, without contrition, forgiveness is not sought, reconciliation is not established and one remains stuck in the false self, and disconnected from God. Tears of compunction, then, are sacramental, they are an outward, visible sign, of an inward, invisible grace. The tears themselves are not salvation – they cannot achieve anything on their own – but they are the sign of a heart ready to receive it.

Fletcher's flood of tears that will wash away his faults might also remind us of the flood of Noah, when God determined to send a flood to wipe from the face of the earth the human race that he had created along with the animals, because, in the words of Genesis 6:5, 'Every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil, all of the time.' God instructed Noah, a righteous and blameless man, to build an ark to ride out the flood, and by this he and his family survived to continue the human race, while all the wicked perished.

Like Noah's flood, the crucifixion of Christ is a complete re-set moment for the world, but this time, it is God himself, in the form of his son Jesus Christ, who bears the burden of sin, rather than humanity. That sin that never stops crying out for vengeance in verse two is absorbed by the love of Christ on the cross. As another famous hymn puts it:

On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide,
Through the flood-gates of God's mercy,
Flowed the vast and gracious tide;
Grace and love, like mighty rivers

Poured incessant from above,
And God's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.

Our flood of tears is overwhelmed by the deluge of God's love.

In Fletcher's flood of tears, we are also reminded of our baptism, where as we are submerged in water, our sinful selves are metaphorically drowned, and we are united with Christ's dying, with his descent into hell and his burial. Yet the water also represents our being cleansed from sin and reborn into the new life made possible by the resurrection of Christ. It is this hope that is behind the final prayer of the poem: 'Nor let his eye see sin, but through my tears.' The poet shifts the subject from his eyes to God's eyes, requesting that God look not on his sin in judgement, but on his tears with grace, the grace made possible by Christ's work on the cross. The poet is not hiding his sin from God, but is trusting that his tears transform how it is seen. There is no absolution at the end of the poem, only silent articulation – the honesty of a sob. He cannot do anything to mop up the mess, but in faith, he names it, lifts it and lays it in surrender at Christ's feet, trusting that the flood is not the end, it's just the beginning.