

Sermon

Sunday 6 September 2020

Lesson

Psalm 149

As a young minister, I remember visiting an elderly lady who, every day, read passages from the Psalms. Faithfully, she found in these sacred songs poetry for her soul. In moments of reflection, in the quietness of early morning or the peacefulness of an evening, she stole time to sit alone with God. ‘Praise ye the Lord. Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints.’ I find the Psalms to be a true means of opening my soul to the nearness of the Sacred. It may be a single word or phrase or perhaps simply the melodic flow of the language, but the authenticity, directness of speech and affection for God are persuasive and seductive. If we open our hearts to these inspired words, they will sing in our souls.

In the Scottish Reformed tradition, the singing of metrical psalms, *The Psalter*, was a central part of nurturing the faith and spirituality of our ancestors. Psalm tunes were simple in order that people would remember them easily. Singing at home, in an intimate family setting, impressed upon the mind the majesty of Scripture. Psalm-

singing produced an immediacy of the Divine Presence in the most important part of personal life. Perhaps you can remember from your early years, psalms sung in public worship. At my home church in Dundee, the minister regularly chose Psalm 100 as our opening hymn. To the tune, the *Old 100th*, we sang:

All people that on earth do dwell
 Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
 Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell,
 Come ye before him and rejoice.

Decades later, the words and sentiment come readily to mind. The psalm set the tone for public worship, placing God at the centre:

Know that the Lord is God indeed;
 Without our aid he did us make;
 We are his flock, he doth us feed,
 And for his sheep, he doth us take.

Scripture is nourishment for the soul: ‘he doth us feed’. The psalm set for today, Psalm 149, is joyful and uplifting. With exuberance evident in every line, we hear of God’s sheer delight in Israel and her heartfelt delight in God:

Sing unto the Lord a new song.....
 Let [Israel] praise his name in the *dance*:

let them sing praises unto him with the
timbrel and harp.

Israel was elated in her praise of God: she sang, danced and played music. Have there been moments in worship when your mind, heart and soul were lifted by the mystic power of music; by a rousing melody or poetry made deeply memorable by a tender tune?

After the Hebrew slaves had successfully crossed the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, once they were finally free from Pharaoh and truly safe, the sister of Moses, Miriam the prophet, took a timbrel in her hand and led the women in dance. She said, 'Sing ye to the LORD'. Can we imagine their indescribable feelings of joy and freedom and their sense that God was with them, present in their sufferings and their salvation? They danced to the LORD. Centuries later, King David danced enthusiastically before the Ark of the Covenant. With shouting, praising and the sound of trumpet, David danced before the LORD with all his might.

Today we have heard sung the hymn of Sydney Carter, *I danced in the morning*. Written in 1961, it rapidly became extremely popular. Through the sustained metaphor of dance as a way of life, in opposition to death, Jesus affirms the abundance of life and sings, ‘I am the Lord of the Dance’. Originally called the *Shaker Tune*, Carter set the words to a tune with its origins in the Shaker community in the US. For Shakers, or *Shaking Quakers*, dancing was a spiritual activity. The vivacity and charm of the tune encourages the soul to dance as we sing it. ‘Dance, then, wherever you may be’.

Our closing hymn today, *To God be the glory! Great things he has done!*, is one I remember singing lustily in The Boys’ Brigade. With its simple theology, forceful expression and *fortissimo* emotionalism, the hymn lifts and carries the worshipping community. The last lines of the final verse echo the ecstatic enthusiasm of Miriam and David:

But purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.

Before lockdown restrictions, millions of people across the world gathered in churches Sunday by Sunday to sing psalms, hymns and

spiritual songs. Christians of almost every denomination and persuasion - Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Baptist – heartily sang hymns drawn from different languages: Greek, Latin, German, Danish, French, Welsh, Gaelic and English. And, we will do so again! We are blessed with the music of Matthew and the voice of Rachel who, together, help us sing in the silence of our hearts.

Having begun with the pleasantness of singing, dancing and music, Psalm 149 moves to a harsh and sobering tone. From the saints singing joyfully, they are encouraged to execute vengeance upon the heathen, and punishments upon the people. The saints of God are to bind foreign kings with chains and fetter their nobles with iron. In honouring God, Israel is to execute God's judgement. On first hearing, these apparent instructions are difficult to accept. Would a writer today compose a hymn calling for foreign leaders to be put in chains or judges and journalists to be fettered in iron? Tempting as it may seem, these are not sentiments that sit easily within the Christian

tradition. Yet, so much of Scripture depends on careful interpretation.

Like all others, this psalm is not doctrine or philosophy: it is poetry. Sometimes called 'The Psalter's Magnificat', Psalm 149 is similar in purpose to the song of Mary. After learning that she will give birth to the Christ-Child, she says her soul magnifies the Lord:

He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud....
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.

When His disciples asked Him for guidance on prayer, Jesus gave them what we call *The Lord's Prayer*; a prayer used by every Christian in every corner of the world and we will use it again today.

Jesus prayed:

Our Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed by Thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.

What does it mean to want God's will done and God's kingdom to come on earth? Surely, it means the oppressed are liberated, the hungry are fed, and the mighty are put down from their thrones? Set in its time, amidst the violence, uncertainty and might of foreign powers, through poetry and song the psalmist prayed for an end to suffering and for God's justice to reign on earth.

Jesus was soaked in the poetic tradition of his faith. He will have read and sung the Psalms every day, so that His soul was gently shaped and crafted over His lifetime. We are blessed in the Scottish tradition that the Psalms are in our blood.

Amen.