

Psalm 118 vv 1, 19 to end. 10 June 2018 Lullingstone, 17 June Eynsford

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

When asked, some time ago, to choose Bible passages for this current sermon series, I deliberately turned to the Psalms because they are so rarely preached on – and sadly are rarely used now in our services. Yet the Psalms hold a special place in the hearts of many people. Traditionally, clergy have read portions of the Psalms daily at Morning and Evening worship – until recently reading through the whole book of Psalms every month. In 2011 I used ‘The One Year Bible’ to read the whole Bible from cover to cover. It gave readings each day from the Old and New Testaments, along with passages from the Psalms and short verses from Proverbs. It got through the Psalms by the beginning of July, and then started them all over again. I found this emphasis on the Psalms interesting, when the rest of the Bible was read only once.

The Book of Psalms contains 150 songs and prayers, mostly composed between 1000 and 500 BC, which comprise the Jewish hymn book. As such they are still used in synagogues today in the 21st century, and were an inspiration to Jesus in the 1st century. He often turned to the Psalms to help make sense of who he was; as in Psalm 118 verses 22-23: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.’ (NRSV). This is quoted in Matthew, Mark and Luke as Jesus helped people to prepare for and understand his death, since he was rejected and yet has become the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

The Psalms are poetry – not to be read like narrative – but to be read slowly and prayerfully, mulling over the words and phrases. When I read the Psalms, I highlight particular verses that speak to me, and there are numerous verses in Psalm 118 that I have highlighted, like verse 14:

‘The Lord is my strength and song; and is become my salvation.’ (AV)

But there is one verse that I want to focus on now for the rest of this sermon on Psalm 118, which I hope you will remember and think about in this coming week. It will be familiar to many of you. It is verse 24:

‘This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’

In the context of Psalm 118, this day refers to a festal day, a great day of celebration, a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God for his steadfast love and saving acts. We are told that the worshippers went up in procession and entered the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem, singing songs of praise, bedecked with greenery. It makes me appreciate our church festivals, indeed the whole pattern of seasons and festivals of the Church’s year, which we keep in the Anglican Church. How one special period follows another, with little time for boredom. How we have the four major Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter, Ascension and Whitsun/Pentecost. How we prepare for these with Advent leading up to Christmas, and Lent leading up to Easter. And these sombre times of preparation and penitence make the rejoicing at the festivals so much greater. How they teach us about the main events in the life of Jesus and the early church, so that we can give thanks to God with joyful hearts. We decorate our churches, the clergy prepare special liturgies, the choirs prepare special music, and children and adults alike respond in adoration because ‘This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’

But now that Whitsun/Pentecost is over, we are in a period of ‘Ordinary Time’ in the Church’s Year, depicted in churches by the colour green, to indicate a more quiet time of growth in our faith. But although there are no big festivals on the horizon, we do still have a special day each week - the Lord’s Day. ‘This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is a special day each week for Christians. Jesus kept the Jewish Sabbath on a Saturday but, in the Early Church, Christians were already changing this for Sunday – a day to remember and celebrate Christ’s resurrection. Acts 20 (v7) tells us how Paul and the Christians at Troas assembled on the first day of the week – that’s Sunday - ‘to break bread’ – in other words, to celebrate Holy Communion together. And we find it called ‘the Lord’s Day’ in the Book of Revelation (1.10).

When I was a child, there was little else to do apart from going to church on a Sunday. Cinemas and the like were closed, and some Christians I knew even switched off their televisions on a Sunday. But the last part of the 20th Century saw all this change with the introduction of Sunday trading and many people now participate in or go to watch sporting events on a Sunday. This all makes the question of how we keep the Lord's Day something we need to think about. Each of our churches has a main Sunday service each week – not fortnightly or monthly – because the expectation is that Christians will want to worship God regularly on the day that the Lord has made, and will want to come together with other Christians to rejoice and be glad on this day of Resurrection. But there are numerous examples of Jesus breaking the Sabbath laws, and he famously said: 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath' (Mk 2.27) So we shouldn't get too uptight about Sunday observance. If the Sabbath was made for us, the gift of a God who loves us and wants the best for us, then it is a time for both worship and relaxation; a break from the daily grind, a time for refreshment at the beginning of the week.

Just as we often use this verse from Ps. 118 to introduce the Sunday service at St Martin's or we put it to music in the Sunday service, many Church schools use it on a daily basis as the school meets for Christian worship. Sunday may be a special day for Christians, but there is a real sense in which every day is a day that the Lord has made, and we should rejoice in God's goodness every day and be glad in it. We give thanks to God our Father for our creation and preservation because he gives us life – in Him we live and move and have our being. And every moment of our lives is precious and shouldn't be wasted. But it's easy to take life and time for granted, especially when things are going reasonably well. It's like breathing. We rely upon it totally and yet we are probably only conscious of it when we might struggle to get air into our lungs. In the same way, people who have had near-death experiences, or survived an accident in which other people died, often speak about being thankful for each moment and trying to do good with the rest of their lives. Each morning we should give thanks and dedicate the day to God. Each evening we should look back over the day and take stock.

St Ignatius of Loyola – founder of the Jesuits in the 16th Century – devised a spiritual exercise called ‘the examen’. This helps people to prayerfully examine the events of the day, going back over things in their mind in order to see God’s presence in them and to discern his direction for their life. There are five steps:

1. First you ask God to help you look at the day through his eyes.
2. Then you give thanks for the day past – because each and every day is a precious gift from God.
3. Then you ask for God’s Holy Spirit to help you to review the day.
4. Then you consider both the good and the bad about the day. You must be prepared to face up to your shortcomings and where things haven’t gone too well. Not to make yourself feel bad, but to learn from them.
5. Finally, you look forward to tomorrow, asking God to be there to help you.

Perhaps a regular exercise like this will help us to be more conscious of how we use our time and more thankful to God for his gift of life. Not for regrets, but to appreciate the present moment and to put our futures into God’s hands. As a birthday card of mine said recently: ‘OK, you’re a year older, and older than you’ve ever been before. ... But you’re a year younger than you’ll be this time next year... and in fact, younger than you’ll ever be again.’ So whether we think of ourselves as young or old, ‘This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ Amen