

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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Psalm 8

1st September 2013

Psalm 8

Revelation 21:1-7

This is the last Psalm that we will be looking at for just now, but over the past seven weeks of exploring these first Psalms in the book, one thing that has become clear is that they all arise from deep feeling – whether it is a feeling of sadness or confusion or question or joy. That is how it should be. The Psalms are songs and the best songs express deep feeling whether of love or loss or protest or whatever. Psalm 8 is written from a feeling of deep wonder.

“O Yahweh, our King, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

Last Sunday at Messy Church my assignment was to help people make their own constellations with potato printing or sticker stars. We were talking about God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky. Talking to the children, it was amazing how many of them seemed pretty unaware of the stars. Perhaps at this time of year with the late darkness that is not so surprising, but it made me wonder if we might, maybe around the end of December, include a little star-gazing in our Messy Church, to help the children get a feeling of wonder. The Psalmist certainly was filled with wonder from looking at the stars.

He begins by looking at the stars, those reminders of the vastness of God's creation, and from there he reflects on humanity's relative smallness, and so he goes on to wonder at the way that God has given us so much, and made so much of us. His wondering takes him to think about humanity's domination over the rest of creation. He does not ask if it is right, or how it should be exercised, he just takes it as a given: that the rest of creation is in subjection to human will.

This is true. It is not just a line in the creation story in Genesis. In fact you might say that the line in that story, where God tells humans to fill the earth and subdue it, got there because that author was reflecting on the way things just are in the created order. God has given us dominion, and we use it every day. We use it in farming and gardening, in caring for our pets or in keeping animals in the wildlife park or in trying to breed pandas at Edinburgh zoo. We use it in keeping mice and rats and creepy-crawlies out of our homes. If we didn't have dominion we couldn't do that: the spiders would form an army and fight against us!

The psalmist's deep wonder leads him from one thought to another, and leads him to wonder at all that God has given us. And as we read this Psalm, one which is a favourite for many people, we too are drawn into that sense of wonder and have our own hearts opened up to praise.

Another context for wonder is when we gather around the table in communion as we do today. There was a tradition for communion at one of my former churches, the little church at Heriot,

which I hadn't seen elsewhere, though I had heard about it as something which had died out. There on communion Sundays there wasn't only a white cloth on the table, but there were also white cloths laid along the book-boards of the pews. They were held in place with special clips. The first time I saw that I thought "Oh dear, how old fashioned!" And maybe it was. But over the years I was the minister there, I came to see it in a different way. On one level, and I am sure that this was how most people saw it, and where the tradition came from, having the cloths in the pews showed that they were, on this occasion, an extension of the table. And so, although people no longer moved from the pews to sit around a large table in batches, which is how the Church of Scotland once served communion, people were reminded that they really were still sitting at God's table.

But the other thing that the white cloths reminded me of was that at communion we are attending a celebration. I wonder how many of you use a white table-cloth every day? Table-cloths are going out of fashion for daily use now, but I was brought up with them, used to protect a highly polished, easily scratched table. But they weren't white cloths: they were brown or blue or red, or patterned so that they wouldn't show every splash and mark on them. White shows everything – especially wine! White cloths take a lot of laundering, and we here today should say that we are very grateful to those who take care of our white communion linen for us. White, pure, shining immaculate white is celebration, White is a wedding. And here we are celebrating the marriage of Christ and his church. Here is where heaven and earth meet.

The Jews thought that heaven and earth met in the temple, the holy place, the earthly home of God. But Jesus talked of himself as the temple of God. Jesus is where earth and heaven meet. And so what we think of as his last supper was also a first supper. It pointed forward to the heavenly banquet. In fact it did so quite explicitly, for Jesus himself said that he would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until he drank it new with his friends in the kingdom of heaven. So the last supper, which we remember at communion, is also the first course in the heavenly banquet.

Isn't banquet an opulent word? We don't often talk about having a banquet these days, and when people do what they mean is a pale shadow of the kind of banquets that people used to have, in mediaeval times or earlier, in Biblical times. Of course not everyone had banquets: they were for the rich and their guests. But we are God's chosen guests, the friends of his Son, and we are invited to a banquet – a feast which goes on and on for day and days and days.

Imagine being handed a menu, and looking at it and saying "I can't choose because it all looks so good." And then you are told you don't have to choose, you are getting it all! That's God's banquet. It is being with Jesus. It is a party with the best conversation, the best food – and no calories, the best wine – and no one gets drunk, and more of the best conversation. And Jesus in the middle of it all. When we gather around the table, it is the first course in the eternal banquet: no wonder we use white cloths.

God gives us so much, so very much, that in the end, as the Psalmist concluded, we are very little lower than God himself. We who are made in God's image are invited to dine with him as his guests. And a guest is someone whom you wish to honour, to make much of.

We talked to the children about Jesus' parable of the great feast, which was occasioned by someone making an assumption that they knew something of God's guest list. In his story those who expected to go did not value the invitation, so did not prioritise God's party. And we know that there are many like that in this post-Christian society, and even in some churches – I hope not in this one. People who assume that God who loves them – they are right about that – will

always wait for them to be ready to follow in his way, will not demand that they make following him a priority in life. The banquet does not wait for them. It goes on without them, and they may not even be aware of it.

Then there are those who never expected to be invited, but were. Both categories of people are challenging for the church. Do we think we are privileged? Do we think God will prefer us? Do we think that knowing more or performing ritual will make us God's special people and ensure our invitation? The invitation came to those who did not usually get to go to banquets, the ordinary people, the lowest people. The invitation came to those who would value it and drop everything to go. Do we drop everything else in life to spend time with God and his people, to accept the invitation to dine and to live in Jesus' company? Or do we say that we are too busy, that it isn't convenient just now.

And then, in Matthew's version of the story, there is one man who accepts the invitation but is turned away for not dressing up. What is that about? They were told to come straight from the streets and the fields, they wouldn't have time to dress, even if they had the clothes. There is one theory that when a grand banquet was given the inviter also issued grand clothes to the guests, and this one did not put them on. Be that as it may, what this man is doing is showing that he takes the invitation casually. He is unaware or unimpressed by the magnificence of the occasion, or simply is not prepared to behave appropriately. He is like someone who checks his mobile phone in a grand concert, or who answers it – just as the orchestra gets to a specially quiet part of the music. If you have ever been in a concert where that went on, you would probably have been annoyed by the lack of respect, would probably have been glad to see such a person ejected.

We are invited to God's table, not because we deserve it, or have earned it. We are invited to the wedding supper of Jesus and the church, his bride, because God loves us and for no other reason. We are invited here today, as heaven and earth meet around the communion table. We are invited every day to leave the mundane and live in this wonderful world God has made with our eyes wide open to his presence. (That's one of my favourite lines from a funeral prayer.)

So come, with wonder at God's gifts and meet at the wedding feast of Christ and his church, of which this bread and wine is just the hors d'oeuvres. Amen