

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **Psalm 5**

**11<sup>th</sup> August 2013**

Psalm 5

Luke 18:9-14

I don't know how the various press reports about the abuse at the Fort Augustus Abbey school have affected you. I know that every time I have heard more about it, my heart has sunk a little further. It is upsetting because of what happened in itself; that children who were sent to a place where their parents thought they would be safe and cared for found that it was not always like that is itself a tragedy. But that those who made their lives fearful should be the same people who were supposed to teach and model the love of God is even worse. The story should be told, those who were harmed need to have people know what happened to them, but of course now that it is told it builds yet another layer of anti-Christian rhetoric into the press and into society.

I don't know if it has occurred to you, but we are the first generation of Christians in Europe, pretty much ever, to live in a time when the church is not respected. Even at the time of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, people still gave the Church, and the gospel it proclaimed, a place, a prominent place in society. The church disagreed within itself, at the Reformation, or, in Scotland again later in the 1840s in the lead up to the Disruption, when the Free Church was founded, and it mattered to society, because the church mattered, because it was important. Now that is not so. Now if people outside the church talk about its place in society it is usually to ask why it has one. You hear people question why Bishops should sit in the House of Lords. You hear people say that it should not matter what a church thinks about matters which the government are debating, from minimum-price alcohol, to Gay marriage, to overseas aid.

The church in Europe now has enemies where for centuries we have had few or none, and when we have had them it has been in the shape of mediaeval invading armies, threatening to bring in another religion – not here, but in the Balkans or in Spain, for instance. But now the church has enemies, and again I am not thinking of the people like Richard Dawkins who are most outspoken and vitriolic in their attack on our faith and our structures. No, I am thinking of those, and there are many, who like to gently ridicule people of faith, or who simply ignore that side of life altogether. It is easier to meet a direct attack and direct accusations, than assumptions and gentle, vaguely tolerant or intolerant laughter.

When the Psalmist was under attack by enemies he asked God to lead him in his, God's, righteousness (V:8). Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness, because of my enemies; make your way straight before me. He wanted to be led in God's righteousness, not in his own idea of what was right, because God's ways are broader, and his righteousness is never repellent, but warm and welcoming.

The Psalmist is in a situation which in essentials is not unlike that faced by the church in Europe today. It is a question of who is right. Whose ideas, whose ways of going about life are right? And so the Psalm begins with the singer asking God to hear him and to listen as he lays his case before him. He will present his case to God and then, like Habakkuk later in history, he will have to watch and wait for God's answer.

In presenting his case, however, his way is not to argue how right he is. No, instead he thinks about God's character and how right and righteous God is. Not a God who delights in wickedness, he says, and we might say "Well, duh, of course not." But it wasn't of course in these days. If you think of the stories you might have been told of the Norse or Roman or Greek gods, you will remember that some of them loved to make mischief for its own sake. They were tricky and unreliable. The gods of the nations around ancient Israel were of that nature, although their stories are not so well known to us today. But God, the only God, the true God is not like that.

God is pure and trustworthy and cannot give a home or hospitality to wickedness. This means that God will not give room to those who do wrong. Sin, if you think about it, is not a thing in itself. Sin never comes apart from a person doing wrong, and because of the wrong things done, the Psalmist expects that those who do them will not be welcome with God. Lies and bloodthirstiness and deceit are only discovered when someone does something, when someone acts, and these are not the sort of things that please God. It is a good thing when we approach God, when we have complaint to make or a case to argue, to remember who it is that we approach. The Psalm is right to say that God does hate wrongdoing of every kind, and that such deeds are never impersonal but are attached to a person, and if no one else is harmed by them, the doer certainly is.

But when you start thinking about God, you can't end just where it suits you. God hates wrongdoing, and which of us can say that we have never done wrong? The Pharisee in Jesus' story thought that he could, and did Jesus say that God was even able to hear his prayer, never mind answer it (not that he thought he needed to ask for anything in particular, if you notice)? The Bible, from Moses to Jesus, from Isaiah to St. Paul, teaches us that we all have sinned, we have all done what is wrong and so we have all come short of what God created us for and still hopes, plans and expects for us. It may be that when he began his song our Psalmist thought he would be able to say they do this but I don't, they are unrighteous, but I am not. But when he comes to think about it, he can't.

Instead he says But I through the abundance of your steadfast love, enter your house. (v:7). It was not because of his deeds, but because he knew he needed forgiveness that the tax-collector went away heard and healed and forgiven, it was because he opened himself up to God's gracious love. That is true for all of us. There is no point in saying "I'm not as bad as so-and-so," because that means that you are relying on your own righteousness to make you worthy to be welcomed and given hospitality by God. There is not point in saying "I am not as bad as these people who don't even believe in God. I am not as bad as those people who are trying to undermine the Christian faith. I don't do that." Maybe not, but nor was that the intention of those monks at Fort Augustus. And the answer to that isn't "Well, I wouldn't do anything like that." The only answer is that it is only by the steadfast love of God that any of us can find a welcome within his house, his family, his kingdom.

Of ourselves, we all do things which others can find put them off the Christian faith. It can be the obvious things or it can be more subtle, the attitude of mind of the Pharisee, the keeping oneself apart from the world which God has made and put us in to live in and love for his sake, and be

part of his redemption. It can be the one off mistake, which we find it hard to live down. There are all sorts of things which our enemies can cast up at us, personally or because we are a part of the church.

And it is because of enemies that we need so much to be led by God in the way of his righteousness. God's righteousness is not what the world expects of us. It is not a human quality. God's righteousness is what we see in Jesus. It is the love that listens to those who are humble and sorry, like the tax collector. It is the compassion that weeps over the city of the people who will shortly do him to death, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem. It is the joy over one person who knows their need of forgiveness. It is the welcome which does what our Psalmist finds hard to do: which loves the person who sins, who does wrong, while still abhorring the wrong they do. So Jesus would heal and forgive and tell people to go and sin no more; so he could pray that God forgive even those who hoisted him high on a cross.

We need to be led in the way of God's righteousness, because that will keep us from giving way in the face of the taunts or jeers or indifference of our enemies. It will keep us from reacting with harshness of attitude or word. It is God's righteousness, and remembering that we are totally dependant on it for our own acceptance by him, that will keep us from retreating behind walls of indifference or feigned deafness to the voices of our critics, which will keep us always humbly looking to see where our faith speaks to the modern world in which we live.

And it is the righteousness of God, given us through Jesus, which lets us know that we stand in God's favour, although we do not deserve to, and which in the end surrounds us like a shield, like a shield designed to wrap around a person and give total protection.

This is a song to sing when individually or as a church we feel the stress of living what is a very counter-cultural life, the life of a child of God. I was talking to a young woman recently, a young woman who is gently feeling her way into the path of faith, and in her conversation she said "But no one goes to church now, it's not what you expect to do." And it's not. You who are here this morning are doing the unexpected by doing exactly the same as what, a couple of generations ago, was expected. So quickly have things changed. And so there are times when you will know that you are up against the expectations of the world and choices have to be made. Times when you need to be led in God's righteousness, not your own or what society expects.

And when you follow that way, there is joy. When you follow that way it is a taking refuge in God, who becomes a hiding place for you, a home, the place where you most want to be. And so there is joy. It was one of the ancient divines who said that joy was an infallible sign of the presence of God, and when we know ourselves to be in his place, kept by his righteousness, saved by his Son, then there is joy. After all, what does it matter if we are thinking and believing and living in a way that people around us find strange; through the abundance of God's steadfast love we enter his house. That doesn't just mean that we can come to church. It means that we live in God's presence, enjoying the hospitality of his place, of heaven itself.