

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

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## **PSALM 2**

**21<sup>st</sup> July 2013**

Psalm 2

Philippians 2:1-11

At the end of June when we were summing up our month on the stewardship of our talents, we looked at Psalm 1. Today we come to the next Psalm in the songbook, and over the next few Sundays we will be looking at the next few Psalms.

There are various ways of putting a hymn book together. Just before I went off on holiday I had to re-engage with CH3, as this is what the congregation in the Costa Del Sol use, and I found it really difficult, because I had forgotten how that book was put together. Some hymn books are simply alphabetical, while others are thematic. I once served as a student in a church where each Sunday morning the organist looked up the first hymn then got the choir, which was small and fairly feeble, to sing the hymn before or after it as an introit, on the assumption it would be one the same theme. It doesn't always work that way.

On one level it doesn't work that way with the book of psalms. Psalm 1 is talking to us as individuals, telling us to keep our spiritual leaves green by walking in God's way and not in the way of sinners or scoffers. Psalm 2 is addressing power in the world. It talks about the rulers of the world, about kings and nations, and power and authority. And it talks about God. In many ways it is a psalm of theocracy.

Theocracy. God being in charge. As I have thought about that word this week, it has become clear to me that it has nearly always been misused. If you were to ask people to name a theocracy today, they might come up with Saudi Arabia, or Iran; nations which are ruled by a religious law, and where the clerics have a lot of power. But many people, at least many people outwith these sorts of countries and their regimes, would not necessarily call this sort of theocracy a good thing.

To us this sort of rule seems Mediaeval, and so it is. In the middle ages the clerics were in charge across Europe. Priests and Archbishops advised the monarchs. The Pope could give the rule of nations to one person or another – think about the shenanigans surrounding the Scottish crown at the time of John Balliol and of the Declaration of Arbroath, where the Thanes of Scotland petitioned the Pope to recognise that they were a nation and not give their over-lordship to the English Crown. No one doubted that the Pope had the authority to see to these matters. And this was thought of as a form of theocracy, because the Pope and his bishops, they stood for God. God was in charge, and the known world was thought of as Christendom – the area where Christ was the supreme ruler.

And at the reformation the two Johns, Calvin and Knox, tried to transpose the theocracy of the priests to the theocracy of the consistory. In Geneva the reformed church took control of everything from education to rubbish collection. In Scotland, right up to Victorian times Kirk Sessions chastised people for what we might now think of as civil crimes as well as for religious failings. They were right in thinking that there is no difference in God's eyes. In the records of these Kirk Sessions you can find many instances of help being given to the poor, but this is not what is usually remembered. What is remembered is the punishment given to the fallen, and that the way that the church's - God's - representatives went about things did not always accord with the gospel of salvation and the love of God which they preached.

And of course, before the reformation and after it, God's representatives did not always act in appropriate ways. That has always been the problem with the church when it sets itself up as God's mouthpiece: human desires and failings get in the way. Power corrupts, goes the saying, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This is where Psalm 2 comes in. It addresses those who have power and want to believe that it is theirs to do what they want with. It addresses those who, having power, are determined to hold on to it, and to use it to further their own ends. The Psalms are nearly always very relevant to modern life and goodness knows we don't have far to look to see leaders and politicians and kings of business who want to use their power to cast off the restraint of God's rule and reign. I don't need to name them, but we can see the human misery that they cause: in the refugees crossing borders and continents; in the neighbour made redundant by a company going bust because of the unregulated speculation of the banks; in the way that change or lack of change in policies and laws can be traced to the influence of rich consortia or popularity contests.

We no longer live in Christendom. We live in a secular state in a post-Christian age. So what has theocracy to do with us?

I would say it has as much relevance as ever it did. You see the rule of the Imams or of the priests or even of the consistory or the Kirk Session was never really theocracy. It was a short-cut, a way of justifying certain people having power. At its best it was a reminder that ultimate power rests with God alone, but it was never really God being King of the world. And yet God is King of the world: the world he made, the world Christ redeemed, the world we live in.

When we read or, better, sing, the psalms, we should remember that these were songs which Jesus sang as well. Jesus sang this Psalm. He sang it and as he grew up he would learn that in his day it was a bit of a radical song. It was a song which could be sung as a part of piety, so was "innocent", but which could be used to rouse feelings against the occupying powers.

And it included the line which says that the Lord has said to "me", "You are my son, today I have begotten you." When Jesus sang that, what did he think? How did it help him understand who he was and what was his part in God's being king of the world?

If it was a song of defiance and faith, it was also prophecy. Just like all the Old Testament, this psalm is part of the back story of Jesus. Sometimes the Christian church has succumbed to the temptation to tell the story of Jesus in isolation. But that is like coming into a series of books half-way through. Have you ever done that? Have you picked up a book and read and enjoyed it, and then discovered that there are more books in the series and yours is not the first one? So you get hold of the previous volumes, and suddenly the story you first read makes a whole lot more sense, and is richer and even more interesting to you. That's what the Old Testament does for the story of Jesus. It illuminates what is really going on, and shows that it is even more than we might have thought.

So this Psalm talks of something that once was: God's King on God's hill, David and his successors; but it is something which people knew was far more fully still to be. It was something which, the gospel writers tell us, came into being when Jesus came. It was something which Jesus declared when he said that with him the kingdom of heaven had come near. With the coming of Jesus, in the fullest way possible, God became King, not only of Israel, but of the world. And Jesus showed us what that kingship looked like.

It is hard to imagine anything looking as little like the power politics of earth.

Paul, writing to the Philippians and telling them how to live as God's representatives in the world, highlights Jesus' obedience. This is in stark contrast to the rulers of the world who stand against God and seek to throw off his lord-ship and the obedience it demands of them. Jesus lived a life of obedience to God, and this obedience led to him setting things right wherever he went. It led to him healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching the truth. It led to him overthrowing the temple tables, pronouncing woes on the corrupt authorities, coming into conflict with those who lived in other ways. It led to his death. And it led to his resurrection and ascension to glory.

Paul applies that kind of theocracy to the church, to Christian people setting out to follow Jesus' way. To those who have benefited from all that his death has won for us in terms of freedom, salvation and life. That is what theocracy should mean; not God's representatives taking control and enforcing laws, but God's children living in obedience to him. In individual lives that is obvious: we hold our doings and choices up to the standard of God's selfless love.

When you apply this theocracy to the church, it means living at peace, working together and looking to each other's interests, not to our own. That last one is the real test. Power corrupts so that people want to retain it, which means looking to their interest and not to the interests of others, but God's people will give power away, if in so doing they can win benefit for someone else; if in so doing they will be putting something right in the world.

Psalm two is a Psalm of conflict. Who is going to be in charge? But the Psalmist knows that really there is no contest, it just seems like one. But God who sits in heaven, in God's space, laughs at our silly posturing. He knows where real power lies and what it looks like. He knows who his children are, those whom he calls his sons and daughters, who live under his authority and showing his reign, obey his radically different way of living in the world.

There is stark warning in this Psalm, as there is in Psalm 1. But there is also promise of delight. Psalm 1 begins by saying that those who delight in the law of the Lord are happy. Psalm 2 ends similarly by reminding us that all who take refuge in God, who live securely under his care are likewise happy. It is a choice and like all choices, it has consequences. If we choose to live under God's care then we choose to live as his children, then we follow the example of Christ, who in obedience put things right, looking to the interests of others, and was first enthroned on Zion's hill on a cross, before he was raised to God's right hand.

When you look at the world this week, when you look at the world as it comes to you in your personal life and the life of your family and friends, in the life of this village; when you look at the the world as it comes to you through the media, there may be times that you question whether God is really king of the world. When these times happen, remember it is your job, as God's servant and beloved child, to show his reign in the way that you confront whatever the world has to throw at you. Remember too that if you do this, then God promises to be with you and to be a refuge for you.