

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

FOOLS OR FOOLS FOR CHRIST

26th July 2015

Psalm 14

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The Psalm we read this morning begins "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'" I wonder, when you read that verse, who do you think of? Are there some public figures who talk about their atheism who come to mind? Do you think of a friend or a member of your family, who makes no bones about not sharing your faith? We live in an age and a part of the world where declaring a lack of faith in God, or you might say a faith that there is no God, is quite fashionable. People might pay lip-service to the idea that everyone's faith should be respected, but on the whole the atmosphere in which our public lives are lived is not one of faith in God. The media, the government, social services almost every aspect of common life is carried on as though faith in God were irrelevant, as though those who are wise and powerful have made the decision that for practical purposes, "There is no God."

However one of the things we have to be careful about when we approach the Biblical texts is that we do not rush to apply them too quickly to our own circumstance. Such open and public atheism as we live with was extremely uncommon in Biblical times. I tried to think of a biblical example of an atheist and drew a blank. Even in Jesus' day and in the early church there are no stories for us of Jesus or Peter or Paul interacting with an atheist. There were those who had different religious traditions - the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant, the Ethiopian eunuch, the people of Athens and the various other Greek cities Paul visited, but none had no God, usually the reverse was true, and they would be used to many deities.

Almost no one then would have said that they didn't believe in God, and if they did say that they would be thought possessed, or insane. Everyone confessed belief in God, whether in the God of Israel, or in the various systems of deities held to in the lands around, in Old Testament times, or in the mutable configurations of Greek and Roman deities which varied locally, in New Testament times. Intellectual atheism was more or less alien to the Biblical writers. This is why David, in this Psalm, says that the fool says in his heart that there is no God. People just didn't say it aloud.

People didn't say it aloud, but there were those who acted as though they thought this, and this is what the Psalm is getting at. It is talking about what we might call practical atheism, a lack of faith in God shown by actions. The Psalm talks about people going astray and doing wrong, about people not seeking after God or praying to him, and so we realise that David is not talking about outsiders, but about people who are, at least nominally, within the community of faith. In his day that would be the whole nation, because to be an Israelite meant that you were expected to be a worshipper of Israel's One God. But not everyone lived as though they really practised their faith.

The modern equivalent might be those who say that since they are not Muslim or Buddhist or anything else, and since this is “a Christian country” then they are Christian too. It is a matter of not being anything else, not believing anything else, which makes them name themselves as Christians, not a matter of active faith, and not a matter which needs to impact on their lives in any way. These may be those who in their hearts say “There is no God.”

Or maybe it is people who are more active in their participation in the community of faith. People who are members of the church but never find it necessary to come. People who attend church but live the rest of their lives in a way that makes it very surprising to their friends when they discover this habit of church attendance – no one here is like that, of course! This Psalm is not really talking about the overt intellectual atheists, the Richard Dawkins' of the world.

And yet we live in a world where intellectual atheists have a lot of power and persuasion at their control. If this Psalm does not allow us to call them “fools” and move on, happy in the knowledge that God will smite them – and I don't think it does – then how does the Bible tell us we are to approach them, those people who actively oppose our faith and seek to persuade others to turn against it?

The fact is that it doesn't have a lot to say on the subject, not overtly. The Bible, for instance does not give proofs of the existence of God: it doesn't have to. It is written by and for those who already believe in God implicitly. We might think it would be great if there were a passage in the Bible which says “This is how you will know that God exists, and that anyone who says he doesn't is simply stupid,” But there isn't. Some people will say that surely the very fact of the world, or creation and all its wonders is a proof of God, but even that is not one which everyone will accept. There are other ways that people can choose to look at the world. Offering proof is not what the Bible is for. It is not a book for convincing outsiders to the faith, although at times it can do that, as God works through the combination of its words and people's hearts. The Bible is a book for helping people of faith work through what that means, how it matches with their life experiences, how they – we - can continue to have faith whatever their circumstances or emotional reactions to life.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who had faith, or who found faith, or who lost faith, all to help us to grow and develop in our own faith and in the way we live it in all of our lives. It is God's gift to us to help us come close to him, through Jesus. And while God wants us to come close to him for our own sakes and for his, he also wants us to come close to him, to learn to live out our faith, so that the watching world will see us. God's answer to those who proclaim their lack of belief in him is not to come and blast them with his presence and his power, and it is not to offer empirical proofs of his existence which no one can gainsay. God's answer to his doubters is his children, is those who live out their faith in him every day. The way that the Bible encourages us to approach those who have no faith is the way we are to approach everyone – seeing in them a child of God and approaching them with love.

That is why this Psalm was such an important one to the faithful in Israel. It was so important that it turns up again, almost word for word the same, as Psalm 53. Obviously it was well-known and well-sung, it was top of the pops, before it was written down. There is one verse which is a little different in the two versions of the Psalm, and

it may be that these were regional variations – North kingdom and South kingdom, perhaps. But it was important.

When read in context, this is a song which calls the people of the faith to hold on to their faith, to live by their faith, to live as though they trusted that, as it says “God is with the company of the righteous.” and that “When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will be glad, Israel will rejoice.” People of faith are called to show their faith, to show that they trust the God in whom they believe, to show that they live in the way that pleases him, that having faith makes a difference to their lives. They are called to live with hope, hope and confidence that evildoers who act as though there is no God watching, no God to care what they do, who eat up the people, will not have the last word. Around the world and over the centuries Christians have done that in the most appalling suffering, have lived with faith and hope saying how else will the fools who act as though God is irrelevant or non-existent ever come to believe?

Our readings today show two different kinds of folly. For David, who is said to have written this psalm, folly comes in practical denial of God. And to those of us who have faith, we can see exactly where he is coming from, and his diagnoses is still valid and still useful to us. The world we live in, however is in some ways more like the world of Paul where adherence to faith in Jesus' redeeming death and resurrection is seen as folly.

Paul was never one to mince his words, and he names things the way he has heard them spoken of when he calls the gospel which we hold to and proclaim, the good news of Jesus death and resurrection which saves us, foolishness. The Greek world could not understand it, intellectually, and called it foolishness. The Jewish world did understand it but were outraged by the claims where were made about Jesus, and so they called our gospel not only foolishness but an outrage.

And Paul says that this is God's way. He takes from us any intellectual triumph – there are no firm proofs for the existence of God, there is no one proof which is undeniable to everyone. No, our faith does not rest on intellectual certainty and superiority. It rests on God. Our faith is not wise in the eyes of the world. But we have faith in God and believe that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and his weakness stronger than human strength.

It seems to me that our two readings offer those of the community of faith a choice between two kinds of folly. We can be those who say in our hearts and act with our lives as though there is no God – living to please ourselves, with out a care for others, without trust in God when the times are difficult. Or we can be fools for Christ, holding to our faith, living it out in the teeth of the world's uncomprehending mockery, and in the process being the only proof of God that he is working in the world. I know which kind of fool I would rather be. Amen.