

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PSALM 106

23rd July 2017

Psalm 106:1-8
2 Timothy 2:8-13

Each Sunday when we come together to worship God, one of the things that we do, usually near the beginning of our act of worship, is to confess our sin to God. We think of the ways that we have come short of God's goodness, God's love and God's plans for us and we express our sorrow. You might wonder why. Why do we tend to start with such a downer? We all know that no one is perfect, even us, so why do we have to say so, time after time?

As we are looking at some of the Psalms to learn about why and how we can praise God, Psalm 106 can, at first reading seem like the Dismal Desmond at the party of praise. It begins well – we read that bit – “*Give thanks to God for he is good*” and so on, but most of the long Psalm seems to be a catalogue of the sins and errors of the people of Israel, focussing especially on their days in the wilderness. Last week we read the previous Psalm, which praises God for his provision and his covenant relationship with his people. As we did so, we noticed that Psalm 105 glosses over the forty years in the wilderness, with its ups and downs, to concentrate on God giving a land and a place in and from which the people could serve and glorify God.

If we thought it a pity that the desert wandering be missed out in 105, 106 restores the balance with a vengeance! For this is a Psalm of confession. Written at the time of the return from exile, by using this Psalm, reading it, singing it, listening to it, the people are identifying with the wrong that their ancestors did in their time of transition, in the exodus through the wilderness.

And so, they take the story systematically, and begin with the escape from Egypt, and the path through the Sea of Reeds, where they confess that the people expressed disbelief that God could or would save them, incredulity that God did in fact care. But he did.

Then they recall the time when the people were not satisfied with God's leading in the wilderness. The incident that verses 13-15 alludes to is when the people were needing food in the desert, and God sent them the mysterious manna. But they were not content with this, and pined for meat. So God sent them quail, but in eating them they became sick (you can find this story in Numbers chapter 11), and some died. And so, they called the place where this happened Kibroth-hattavah, or “Graves of craving”.

And, going on through the story, they remember the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram, who took two hundred and fifty leaders of the people to confront Moses, and accuse him and Aaron of setting themselves above the rest. This developed into a larger rebellion of the whole people and for a while it was touch and go whether the people would still follow Moses or turn back.

And they recall the shameful incident of the golden calf, when the people were impatient and turned from the one God who had led them and provided for them, to worship a phoney – even though they knew it was a phoney. Again and again Moses has to intercede for the people before God, and again and again God forgives.

Then they remember how when first they reached the promised land, they did not trust God enough to try to go in, but acted on the advice of the ten less believing spies and declared that they dare not. And so, they spent a whole generation in limbo in the desert. In those years sometimes they trusted God so little that they went astray to the gods of the lands around them, even sacrificing, as verse 28 says “to the dead.” The Psalmist leaves it delightfully unclear as to whether this means that the people were making offerings to those who had died, in a kind of ancestor worship, or whether they were making offerings to life-less idols, which they knew had never lived.

They remember grumbling against God and his provision for them, so that even Moses was led astray in the incident where he struck the rock of Meribah, rather than speaking to it, as God had told him to. And when they did enter the land, they failed to do what would have put temptation beyond them, and mingled and compromised their faith with that of the Canaanites, even to the extent of practicing ritual prostitution and child sacrifice – both specifically forbidden in the Law.

Now, the people for whom this Psalm was written hadn't done any of this: it was way, way before their time. And yet they are confessing it to God. Why would they do that? What is the point? Does this mean that we have to repent for the skeletons in our family or national closets? For slavery, for instance, and a nation's wealth depending on human misery? Or for the Highland clearances and the injustice that was meted out to some of our ancestors by some of our ancestors while others of our forefathers raised no protest?

The reason that the people returning from exile used this Psalm was because this is a litany of ancestral failure – a litany which goes on, though in less detail, to the period in which the nation is settled in the land – and yet, this litany is not just about them. You might say that it is primarily not about them at all. If this is a tale of national failures, it is also, supremely, a tale of God's grace. It is a story of people forgetting – so often in it we are told that the people forgot: they forgot God, they forgot what he had already done for them, they forgot their side of the covenant. The people forgot, but God remembered.

The beginning of the Psalm, verse 2, says “Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or declare all his praise?” The answer, of course, is no one, but this Psalm is one attempt. This catalogue of feeble faith and faltering purpose is all about the mighty acts of God.

You see, God never gives up. Each time the people prove faithless, God comes to the rescue: whether it is making a way through the Sea of Reeds, or allowing Moses repeatedly to intercede for the people. Whether it is in delivering them when their enemies are allowed to oppress them – allowed, in an attempt to teach them. Whether it is by listening to their distress in their exile and showing “compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love (v:45). Each time that the people's faithlessness lands them in trouble, God remembers them. And at the end of the

day, despite all the ways that the people have turned from or turned against God, they are still there, still God's people, still being brought from exile.

That is why we confess our sin week by week when we come together. That is why when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, his prayer pattern included the instruction that we should ask God to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Confession does not only remind us to be humble before God; it is not only useful in preventing us from thinking too highly of ourselves. No, in confession and in asking for pardon we are reflecting on the grace of God, on the deity whose nature is always to be merciful.

Psalms 106 at first reading may seem a bit of a dismal list of wrongdoing, but it is a Psalm of praise, not of rebuke. (If you want to read of the same events as a rebuke, read Psalm 78!) In 106 we find a theology of hope. The people confess the historic wrongs, which has the effect of reminding them not to yield to the same temptations, and they remember that God still loves them, still cares for them. The hope that they can therefore have for their present new beginning, as they return from exile to rebuild their national life, is based, not on their own abilities, but on the character of God, who does mighty things and whose love endures forever.

This is what grace means. It means God acting according to his character, to his infinite love, rather than reacting to the vagaries of our wavering faith. The people of Israel looked back to the exodus, and God's bearing with them and rescuing them then, to have hope for a new beginning. As Christians, we always look back to Jesus. Because no matter what we do, what we think, how we behave, it is still a fact that Jesus came, at a moment in time, God's Son sent to rescue us from having to live with the sharp and eternal consequences of our foolish and faithless behaviour.

This doesn't mean that our actions have no consequences. All actions do, for better or for worse, and Christian people make bad choices as individuals, and as larger groups. It is easy to be led astray, as the people of Israel were, without even noticing it. Indeed, when we notice it, we are less likely to make the false turns. But the people of Israel lived through some great changes of culture, not only because of their wandering in the wilderness, but also because the history of the Old Testament sees them live through different ages, and ride the changes from bronze age to iron age. We too, many say, are riding a change of age in these days, and we have yet to see what will become the new normal way to live. The challenge for the church and for churches is to find how to express our faith in a new age without distorting the God of grace and love, without forgetting that confession is a form of worship, without being led astray into the various trends and isms of our age. It can seem a tall order. But we live with hope, hope based not on our ability to read the times, but on the character of God.

We worship the Lord, a God slow to anger and full of steadfast love, who does not hold our sins against us but in Jesus wipes them clean. We worship the Lord, who can take our mistakes and weave them seamlessly into the tapestry of his plan for us and for the world. We confess our sin, and in doing so we remember God's grace to us, which remembers his covenant, made in Jesus' death and resurrection, but chooses not to remember all the wrong we have done. We worship the Lord, Jesus' Lord and God and Father, and so at all times we have hope, for God will at all times be true to his character and so, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." Amen.