

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PSALM 105

16th July 2017

Psalm 105:1-11
Ephesians 3:14-21

The series of four Psalms which begin with number 103 are all about reasons to bless and praise God. Psalm 103, probably the best known of them, gives us the character of God as a reason to praise him: merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; it gives us God's care for his people as individuals, which is something that our generation can relate to very well; it gives us God's tenderness. Psalm 104, which we explored last week, is a Psalm of praise to God for the wonders of creation. It paints pictures of mountains and waters, of various plants and animals and the way that together they make up the wonderful world that we know. And it acknowledges that only human sin spoils the picture. Both these Psalms are easy for us to relate to. We don't have to think too hard to find ways of incorporating their words and thoughts into our own praise of God. Psalm 105 and its partner, 106 take a little more thinking about, if we are to see their relevance.

The first part of the Psalm, the part we read, is not so difficult for us to connect with. In it the Psalmist encourages us to sing to God's praise, and tell of his wonderful works. We are encouraged to seek God's presence and his strength; good, useful instructions, reminders that we always need. If we don't seek God's presence we won't know his strength in our lives. If we don't seek his presence we will find no reason to praise and bless him, and so our own joy will be greatly lessened.

The Psalm then begins to think about God's acts in the world. And the Psalmist begins by thinking widely: *His judgements are in all the earth*. This Psalm is going to concentrate very largely on the stories we find in Genesis of God choosing and caring for one people, but we must not get to specifics too soon. It is important to remember that God is the God of all the earth; that there is no corner of this planet, no corner of the limitless reaches of the universe where God is not God. His *judgements* are seen in all the earth – not only God's creative work, but his moral imperatives.

The Psalm then gets into the idea of covenant. Throughout the Psalm we, the worshippers are being reminded of things, but we are told that God needs no reminders: he is mindful of his covenant – God does not forget. He does not forget the covenant with the earth, made in the presence of Noah after the time of the flood – the promise that as long as earth endures there will be seedtime and harvest, and that the world will never be destroyed by flood, by the waters of chaos, which the Hebrew people so feared.

God does not forget his covenant, and neither should his people. This is true whether we are thinking of his covenant with the earth, which reminds us that God sees a bigger picture than simply our own immediate concerns. It is true if we are thinking, as the Psalm does, of the covenant with Abraham and his immediate offspring, a

promise which was to do with the land. That covenant is not just to do with possession and security for this extended family. It is to do with God's missionary purpose. He gives them a land so that they might have a pied-à-terre in which to gather strength, and from which they might be a light to the nations. The idea and remembrance of these covenants lies behind everything that Jesus says and does, and that his followers write to the emerging church. Covenant means that we are bound up with God in an agreement. Further down the Psalm the Patriarchs are referred to as prophets. I am sure that this is not how they thought of themselves – they had enough to do without that! But by being in relationship with God, they allow God to be seen through them; dimly through themselves: their actions, attitudes and decisions; and more clearly through their life story and how it becomes part of the story of God at work in the world.

The main use of the idea of covenant that most of us will come across is in the marriage service, where the bond into which two people enter is voluntary, but none the less binding. No one forces a covenant relationship, but all the same, once entered into, it cannot be just walked away from. God does not forget his covenants, and Jesus built on the covenants of the past to make a new covenant, sealed in his blood. He made a covenant which supersedes all others, in which we are brought into God's family, given our own security and given strength by his spirit (that's his side of the covenant) so that we too might be a light to the world (and that is our side). When we name ourselves as Christians, when we ask God to forgive us and make us his children, we are entering into that covenant, willingly, but bindingly. We should not forget the covenants, because who we are is rooted in them. And we should thank God that he is a God who makes covenants and remembers them.

In talking about the covenant with Abraham, our Psalmist talks about the patriarchs, the founding fathers of the nation of Israel. Abraham is mentioned, and Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph. In singing about these patriarchs, the Psalm is not just re-telling the story found in Genesis, but he is talking about God's grace and provision. So we see kings rebuked if they want to take advantage of this family. We see God's planning in the famine which afflicted the land of Canaan. It is interesting and informative that when that famine comes up we are not told that it simply arose – that is what Genesis says, that a famine arose. But this Psalm says that God "summoned famine against the land, and broke every staff of bread." God's hand is seen in even what look like afflictions. God is to be the staff, the security, what and who is depended on, not mere bread. But it is only in hindsight that God's presence can be seen even in adversity.

And then we see God's provision, in bringing the people to Egypt and in already having his servant Joseph in place for them. And the Psalm acknowledges that this was not always easy: Joseph "*was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron...*" (By the way, this is where the saying "The iron entered his soul" came from: this is the AV version of this Psalm, picking up on the fact that the Hebrew word for neck means more than just the physical, outside of a person, but also has to do with what is going on in the inner being.) People are being called on to think of their history and give God thanks.

We too have history to thank God for. It includes the history of his people as told in this Psalm: if it were not for the foundation of faith and story in God's people before Christ, how would Christ have come and to whom? But we also have Jesus to give thanks for, Jesus in his historical self, Jesus in his saving work, and Jesus in his eternal presence. And we have those who have come since then. We can thank

God for those who brought the good news of Jesus to our forefathers, and those who first told it to us. We can give thanks for Columba and Aidan and the old Celtic saints and missionaries: we can give thanks for the Roman authorities who ordered the church that arose from their work; we can give thanks for the reformers and what they went through to try to ensure that the pure word of the gospel was heard, without the accretions which tend to adhere through the ages; we can give thanks for the generations who worshipped in this area, and the ministers and missionaries who worked among them. And we can give God thanks for whoever first told us the good news about Jesus – parents, teachers, Sunday School teachers, whoever it was – and for those who help our faith to grow, so that we have something to tell to family, friends and neighbours. “O give thanks to the Lord” is how this Psalm begins, and so we should.

And we should give thanks for God’s grace. In recounting the Joseph story and in recounting the story of Moses, God’s grace is what the Psalmist wants to focus on. By verse 24 of the Psalm we see the people in Egypt becoming numerous, and therefore suspect. You can imagine the Egyptians saying “I never see an Egyptian face in the market these days: there are so many of these immigrants. And wherever you go you hear Hebrew, Hebrew, Hebrew.” The Hebrews grew in number and so they were held in suspicion and feared. Things looked bad, so God sent Moses and Aaron.

And now the Psalm recounts eight of the ten plagues which Moses and Aaron did to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go. (Eight out of ten – a prize to anyone who notices which are missing!) What the Psalm wants us to think about is God’s power and God’s goodness in setting free the people. God was so good that in the end they left burdened with the wealth of Egypt, with silver and gold. God was so good that no one stumbled. God was so good that he led them by cloud and by fire. God was so good that he fed them with quails and gave water in abundance from the rock. And why? Verse 42 tells us: “*For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant.*” God remembers, he doesn’t need reminded.

The trials and tribulations of the forty years of the exodus are glossed over here: there could be a lot more to say – there is always more that we can say when we are remembering God’s dealings with us – but this Psalm simply says “*So he brought his chosen ones out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the people, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the Lord.*”

This Psalm was written for the use of the people returning from exile in Babylon, and so it talks about that previous time when the people were set free from bondage. Freedom, however is not the freedom to do whatever we want: the Psalm says *that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws*. God sets us free so that we may serve him. The New Testament writers are quite clear about this. If we use our freedom to indulge ourselves, if we use our freedom to bind others, then we are not free, but allowing ourselves to be bound by selfish desire and the ways of the world. God sets his people free to serve him, to live in his way, to bring honour to his name by our prophetic lives. The call is to praise the Lord, and to do so in more than word, in more than just memories and reflections, but also to praise God by the way that we live in his service. Amen.