

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PSALM 104

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Psalms 104  
Romans 11:33-36

“Why should the devil have all the best tunes?” Apparently this was the question which William Booth asked when he started up the Salvation Army bands. Not that he was the first to use these words: they stem from the movers and shakers of the early Methodist movement. It wasn't that there was no sacred music in his day, of course there was, but hymn tunes were not those which were sung and whistled in the street. Those who could go to cathedrals might hear very good choral music, those who attended their parish churches (this was in England) might hear the village choir sing an anthem, but hymns and congregational singing were not yet commonplace, and their tunes were not terribly catchy. It was the drinking songs which were memorable. And so, William Booth and his bands took the tunes which were well-known, rescued and redeemed them, and gave them new words, words which taught about God and proclaimed his love and his glory. It is something which hymn writers still do, using the music of the people to sing to God.

This Psalm, Psalm 104, is one which seems to have similarly been rescued. There is wonderful poetry in its lines, poetry which praises God for creation, for the way that the natural world works and is held together. *You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep, as with a garment.* And scholars tell us that in that beautiful poetry is to be found more than an echo of an older work, an Egyptian hymn of praise to the sun. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the sun as a god, and in a catalogue of the blessings of creation they gave the sun the credit and the praise, and because many other middle eastern people also venerated, and sometimes feared, the sun, the Egyptian work was well known.

But our anonymous Psalmist, who must have known the Egyptian work, so great are the similarities, was not going to let such good poetry be wasted on praising something which his theology taught him was another part of creation. He would rescue this song from worship of creation to worship and use it to praise the creator, to praise God himself.

It is a beautiful Psalm, and extremely pictorial. Like a slide show or a film, we see scene after scene unfold before us. It begins in the realms of light. We see God dressed in light, riding the winds, using the clouds as his chariot. The beams of his residence are to be set on the waters – by which the Psalmist is invoking the ancient image of the earth's atmosphere being made like a bubble which exists with the waters of chaos above and below. God has used the very waters of chaos as the foundations of his chamber: he has tamed the ancient terror of watery destruction.

And then we move on to thinking about the earth. And we see things happen, as it were in fast-forward film. We see these chaotic waters being tamed to make a garment, then shaped so that the mountains soar up through and above them and the

waters flow in trickles and torrents down their sides. We see God controlling the chaos and even using it to bring life.

*You make the springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal....* And so the picture is painted – wild asses, birds, cattle and yes, people are all provided for because of the way that God has ordered his creation and controlled the chaos. He paints a picture of trees, and birds nesting, of wild goats and coney, or rabbits. Then his film forwards itself onward from day to night and we see the moon rise and the nocturnal forest creatures come forth, while the young lions roar. The picture forwards again, and have dawn, when the night animals return to their lairs and people get up and go out to do their work.

It is such a beautiful picture of the way that creation works together. Yes, of course the picture in the author's mind is not that of the Scottish Highlands, but you can use your own imagination to change the scene. The waters become more plentiful and their courses steeper and deeper. There are many more lochs and pools in our picture. But there are still birds, not storks, but song birds, and eagles, and buzzards. And there are still rabbits, and mountain hares, and deer. And when the picture turns to the night we might see the odd wild cat hurry across the scene, hiding again when the sun rises and when people arise to go out to work. V:14-23 is very much like a wildlife programme, like David Attenborough pointing out the things in nature we may have missed. It shows us the lives of different parts of creation coming together and moving apart as the various types of creatures live their own life-cycle in a harmonious whole, giving us a kaleidoscope of the daily pattern of life in the world.

And we can join with the Psalmist in exclaiming *O Lord, how manifold are your works. In wisdom you have made them all!*

The Psalmist turns then to a coastal scene. We island people love our coasts and seas, but it was different for the people of Israel. They had and have a coast, but they feared the sea. They saw it as chancy and chaotic. It was the sea which gave them the idea of primeval chaos being watery. But really, we are told, God is still in charge even here. I love that he says, "creeping things innumerable are there" because he can have had no idea how true that is. Only now are we learning how much we don't know about the species which live in the world's oceans. And then he talks about Leviathan. The Old Testament writers seem convinced that there was a kind of monster living in the Mediterranean, maybe a kind of cousin of the Loch Ness Monster. We never actually see it in Scripture, but it is alluded to by various names, of which Leviathan is one – Rahab is another. On one level we can understand Leviathan, especially in this Psalm, to mean, not a whale or crocodile or other creature known to us, but as the "animalizing" of the monster that was the deep, the chaos that was the sea. And what does he say – that God made it, to sport, to play. God made the sea unpredictable and changeable, but this does not mean that chaos is in charge, it means that God gave the monstrous deep freedom and spontaneity, even as he gives it to us, for God loves freedom in his creation. Freedom does not mean chaos.

The ancient Egyptians proclaimed their dependence on the sun, but with the Psalmist we sing of our dependence on the one who made all things, including the sun. He gives and withholds, he creates and destroys, he brings life and death.

And the Psalmist acknowledges that not everything in the garden is lovely. He prays that the glory of the Lord may endure for ever. He prays that his own act of creative

praise, his composition or meditation might be pleasing to God, but he knows that the presence of human sin is what mars the wonderful picture he has had us rejoice in. "Let sinners be consumed from the earth." It is not a cry for vengeance, but a prayer for the continuing beauty and wonder of God's earth. God made human beings as the peak of his creation, but, ironically it is human beings which spoil it. We spoil it with our inhumanity to each other, and we spoil it by forgetting that the earth was given into our care, and needs to be attended to. To fail to appreciate the world in all its wonder, to treat it as a commodity, to act as though the earth itself owes us anything is sin. It is wrong and it is destructive.

Even in the Psalmist's days there would be those who looked at the wonders of the worlds and thought only of how they could use them for personal gain. It is a complicated area. In v:14, in the middle of his song, he says that God makes plants for people to use. Whenever the Bible talks of creation, it is always clear that one of the purposes that God made for the world was to sustain human life. There is a difference between sustaining human life and indulging human greed, though. Maybe we need to ask ourselves if it is possible to spend our time of worshipping God in contemplation of his amazing world and then go out and live as though we were the only species who mattered. May sinners be consumed from the earth, and may we not be those who sin against our God by sinning against his handiwork.

The main point of this Psalm is to invoke wonder at the handiwork of God. Our faith does not make creation an argument for believing in God: we don't say "everything is so lovely, there must be a good God" because that is a fairly shallow argument for God and one which can be brought down by the instance of the common – too common - midge. Nor do we think that everything we can know about God is taught us from what he has made. The character of our Lord and God has been made known to his people by other forms of revelation from the beginning of time, directly and through the events of his people's history. Believing in the God of his revelation, the God, who, as we saw last week describes himself as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," believing, as we do, in the God who sent his Son to be one of us, love us, live with us, teach us, heal us and die for us, we may still see writ large in the world an ordered mystery and wonder which bears witness to a gracious creator who holds all things in his hands.

The concept of nature as a closed system following its own laws is not a part of Biblical thinking. For people of faith, God is always involved in the world that is set up according to his laws, however these came into existence. It would be difficult to rejoice personally in cold, immutable laws, if such things exist – and modern science seems far from working with such a model. But we rejoice in a warm, loving, gracious Creator, and Psalm 104 invites us to share that joy.

Here is our New Testament reading for today, from Romans 11:33-36:

<sup>33</sup> O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

<sup>34</sup> 'For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

<sup>35</sup> 'Or who has given a gift to him,  
to receive a gift in return?'

<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.