

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

LOVE COVERS

21st May 2017

Psalm 32:1-11

1 Peter 4:1-11

In two weeks' time, I will not be with you, and your Communion service will be taken by Mary Ellen Thomson. I will be on a mother-daughter holiday to celebrate Jennifer finishing school, and we will be in Chicago. And yes, I am looking forward to it. Very much. When you go on holiday you have to make preparations, and depending where you are going or what you plan to do these preparations will vary. When I go off cycling I tend to book somewhere for the first night, pack my panniers and go. But taking Jennifer to Chicago we have to plan a bit more than that; travel and accommodation, visa waivers, and, always advisable when going overseas, we had to get travel insurance. Just in case. Just in case we lose our luggage. Just in case we get ill or have an accident. Just in case British Airways goes bust. If any of these things happens, we are covered. It will still be inconvenient for us, but it will not cost us money which we do not have. The insurance company will pay for us, because that is what it means to be covered.

In our Psalm today David says, "*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*" He means very much the same kind of covering as an insurance company premium gives you. Hebrew poetry is structured in pairs of lines, which either say the same thing in different words or else make an opposite. And so here, in the beginning of the Psalm we see that we have a pair of synonymous lines, saying the same thing in different words. This helps us see what David meant when he said that sin is "covered". He meant forgiven. Transgression is forgiven and sin is covered meant the same in his mind. He is thanking God for forgiveness.

The idea of describing forgiveness as covering is picked up again in the book of Proverbs, where we find the saying that Peter was later to repeat: "Love covers a multitude of sins." (Proverbs 10:12) Love covers sin. Love forgives sin. David in his Psalm is celebrating the love of God which forgives sin.

When we are on our trip, if any of the things which our insurance covers happen to us: if we lose our luggage or end up in hospital or are stranded in the USA with no flight home, before our insurance company can swing into action, there is something we will have to do: we will have to tell them of our plight, tell them what has gone wrong. And David acknowledges that before God can cover our sin, we too have to tell him about it. "*When I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long, for your hand was heavy upon me....*" We are not told when in David's life he wrote this Psalm, but he is looking back on a time when he tried not to admit the wrong he had done, either in general or in specifics. And how often we are like that as well. How often we would rather justify or defend ourselves than admit that we have done wrong. If we confess our wrong to God, we are also admitting it to ourselves. We can no longer pretend to ourselves that we are better than we are, or as good as we would like people to think we are. Many of us have an in-built re-

sistance to confessing our sin, even though only God and we ourselves would know about it.

But in the end David does tell God, and confess all. *“I said ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”* It was that simple. And it remains that simple. We confess, we admit with sadness what we have done and God forgives us. God loves us and love covers, forgives, pays for a multitude of sins. That doesn’t mean that it is easy for God, it doesn’t mean that it costs him nothing. If I incur accident or injury in the USA, where health care costs a fortune, it will cost my insurers very heavily, but they have promised to cover me. When we ask God to cover our sins, it did not cost him nothing, far from it: it cost him the life of his beloved Son, Jesus. But it was because of his love for us that he sent Jesus to pay the premium, and to cover our sins, so that we can be forgiven, so that we can find in God a hiding place, so that free from the burden of our past we can be glad in the Lord and shout for joy, as David encourages us to do.

Peter picks up on that promise that love covers our sins, and he encourages his readers, first of all to stop sinning. “You have already spent enough time doing what the Gentiles like to do.” It is a good way of looking at our lives, to think of how much time we spend doing this and that. You have to spend time sleeping, and also eating and in personal care, and working and so on. And then you have your free time, your leisure time, the time that is yours to decide how to use. Peter describes the way that the “Gentiles” like to spend their time in pretty graphic ways – “Living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry.” Now Peter is probably painting with a broad brush here. It is unlikely that everyone who was not a Christian spent all their time in these ways – Roman society would hardly have held together for any time at all if they had! This is almost a cartoonish picture of society. But it makes a point. And the point is to get the readers, to get us, to think about how we spend our time. Moreover, it is not just our free time that we should consider. It is all our time. Yes, there are many things that we have to do each day or at least regularly, but how we do them, in what manner, with what attitude, to whose glory, can make a difference, both to us and to others.

Peter, remember, is writing to encourage that Christians. He knows that life is not easy for them and that following Jesus will take at least some of them into situations of persecution. He wants to be sure that when they are accused, as he has been and will be again, they can in their own hearts be satisfied that the accusations are groundless, because the Christians will know, even if it is not acknowledged, that everything they do they have done before God, remembering him in every part of their daily lives. It is still very good advice.

Peter reminds these Christians, and us, that what he calls the “end of all things” is near. This doesn’t mean the apocalyptic end of the world, for why would God end the world that he made and loved? But for Peter, as for the whole of early Christianity, what had happened in Jesus’ death and resurrection was the ushering in of and whole new world. In Jesus God has already begun the process of cosmic renewal, whose sign and foretaste is the renewal of human lives through sharing Jesus’ death and resurrection. And the renewal of human lives includes not only the forgiving love of God which covers our sins, but also the forgiving love of the people of God. We are called to love and community even more than we are called to be disciplined about our prayers – which is not an excuse to neglect a regular pattern of prayer.

But if the end of all things is near. If the new creation is already breaking in, then it is characterised by God's people living in community, not living for themselves alone. David's Psalm is about one person's relationship with God, it is a God-and-me kind of song – and some of our hymns and Christian songs are still in that mode. The relationship that each of us as individuals can have with God is such a wonderful thing that no wonder people have always wanted to sing about it.

But although being a Christian begins with God and me, begins with me discovering the love of God, begins with the love of God finding me, that is not the end of the story. Peter knew that his young Christians would not stay the course if they were to see themselves only as individuals who had found God. They needed each other, as Christians have needed each other ever since Jesus called the twelve disciples to follow him. And yet, being a community is so much more complicated than just being God and me. Any group of people, whether Christian or not, soon develops norms which morph into rules, soon develops hierarchies and leaders and followers and so on. And pretty soon personalities rub up against each other and things can get a little difficult.

That is as true in the church as in any other human group. And that is when we should remember what is written on our heavenly insurance policy: that love covers a multitude of sins. God's love covers them, forgives them, and our mutual love for God should lead to the determination to develop mutual love for all God's children, which includes covering, forgiving what we perceive as sins against us. We tend to have this romantic notion about love, that it is only real when it is spontaneous and emotional. But love is action, love is the way that we interact with each other, however we feel about them, and love takes determination. If we love God, responding to his act of love for us when he sent Jesus to cover our sins, then we should be determined to love the children of God. And that means that we sometimes need to do some covering, some forgiving ourselves – and of course, we should remember that those around us are having to forgive us at times.

Mutual love forgives the sins that solitude cannot. Serving one another in love, in determination to live in love is the way forward. It is a sign of the end of all things, which is not the end of the world but the beginning of the new creation. Amen.