

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

PSALM 129

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Sunday 20th March 2011

Psalm 129

2 Corinthians 4:1-2, 16-18

There are two pictures in this Psalm, which are linked by the central verses:

"The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backwards." (v:4 and 5)

The first picture is a nasty little vignette of torture. Israel is imagined as an individual - the Psalmists and prophets often did that - and her various attacks from outsiders and her afflictions are imagined as though she were laid prone on the ground, and a plough or threshing sledge was pulled over her again and again; painful long, straight cuts being made into her back. When you stop to really imagine the picture it is not nice at all.

The second picture is of weeds and grasses growing on the roof of a house. The flat-roofed houses of Israel and the Middle East in general were often covered with a thin layer of soil, just to keep them down in a wind. Nowadays it is a modern green idea to have a living roof, with sedum or other low succulents planted there, but this wasn't like that. There wasn't enough soil to grow anything: these weren't roof gardens. But inevitably stray wind-blown seeds would rest on the soil and take root and try to grow. They might sprout up in the heat of the day, but they never came to anything. They never lasted even one day. No one was ever able to harvest them: and so the idea of anyone calling up a harvest blessing to the rooftop is absurd.

The Lord, though, is righteous. This doesn't mean that God always does the right thing - he does, but that's not what righteous primarily means. It has the meaning of being in right relationship. If we are righteous, we are in right relationship with God; and this can be true for us because of what Jesus did on the cross to enable us to have his relationship with his heavenly Father. If God is righteous it means that he is in right relationship with his people, his creation. In the Psalm, the singer acknowledges how very bad some of the attacks on Israel have been, but he says in it all God has kept a good relationship with his people. And he has proved this by cutting the cords of the wicked.

But now we poor 21st century readers are left wondering what the cords are. This is referring to the first picture. The plough or threshing sledge was, of course, pulled by oxen, and they are joined to it by cords which stretch from the plough to the yoke on the oxen. God has effectually cut this cord. So now, although the plougher still goes up and down, the plough is not following. Those who have attacked and oppressed are still carrying on with their behaviour. They still think that they are having an effect upon poor Israel. But they have become figures of fun, because they haven't noticed that the cords have been cut and that the plough is not ploughing. They haven't noticed that what they are doing is not having any effect any more. They haven't noticed that God in his righteousness has freed Israel from the pain that is their intent.

This is a Psalm about perseverance. Anyone who is a parent or grandparent, or who can remember back to their own childhood, will know that perseverance is a learned attribute, not one we are born with. A small child will play almost obsessively with a toy or some other object for a while, and then something else takes its fancy and the original thing is forgotten. An older child will take up one enthusiasm after another: biking, skateboarding, model making, computer games - and different computer games at different times. And just as the parents and grandparents and aunts have understood that for this child this is the best thing in life and that birthday presents should be aimed accordingly, suddenly that is forgotten and it's on to the next big thing.

It is the same with relationships. About aged 8-12 children often fall out and back in again with each other. I remember when I was in my 20s and working in an Edinburgh boarding school, two friends, Moira and Clare, came to me, independently and both distraught because they had had a fight and they would never be able to be friends again and it was just the end of the world. Both found it hard to believe me when I said that I

thought that they would probably be best friends again in a week or less. And when that did in fact happen they came to me and asked "How did you know?" Only from experience! Children do experiment with friendships, and can hurt each other as they try on new friends from time to time. But as you grow older, while you can still make new friends, you learn how to keep the old ones as well. Perseverance. You discover that it is worth it.

In this Psalm Israel has learned about persevering in her faithfulness to God. And what she has learned is that God will also persevere in faithfulness to her. The Lord is righteous. God does the right thing in his relationships, and being faithful, sticking with someone to whom you've made a commitment, that's the right thing. God has made a commitment to Israel, and he has taken the sting out of her affliction even when the circumstances seem to remain unchanged.

The memory of what she has suffered and the reality of what others would like to see happen to her brings the curse of the absurd to her lips, though. That second picture is absurd, but it is born of real passion, real fed-up-ness that people should treat God's chosen in this way. Israel has learned patience and has learned to trust God in it all - or at least when she is singing this song she has learned and is re-learning it- but patience is not without its flashes of emotion. It is hard enough having people work against us. It is even harder if they seem to have things easier themselves, or to have the approval of others - those harvest blessings may be what the oppressors expected to hear, though in their fields, not on the rooftops.

Maybe the Psalmist should not have been angry, but he was; angry enough to add a verse to his song which sets out to be in praise of God's faithfulness. Whether or not he should have been angry, we know that we would likely have felt that way ourselves. Scripture shows us how we are as well as how we can be or should be. The Psalms were not sung by perfect pilgrims, but by those on the journey - on the physical road and on the road of learning obedience to God. And there is one thing which is good about this spurt of anger: its energy. Surely it is better to be passionate regarding things that we care about. The parent who pulls a child from before the wheels of an oncoming car is furious with the child and the car driver: not because that is the best way to comfort the frightened child: it is not, but because parental love cares, and has been frightened at the thought that the child could be hurt. Passion has to come out one way or another.

What leads to the death of perseverance is not occasional flashes of anger or fed-up-ness, but sluggish neutrality, apathy which is like a virus in the bloodstream, eating away at all that we have found to be good and of value and worth struggling for. That is what weakens the muscles of discipleship. When a person of faith begins to make excuses for wickedness and to go along in silence with things that in their heart they know are wrong, that is when the person most at risk of losing their way in the pilgrimage, of ceasing to make the effort to live in God's way and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

For perseverance is not the same thing as resignation - putting up with things the way that they are. Far from it. Endurance is not a desperate hanging on, but a travelling from strength to strength. Perseverance keeps striving.

And in our striving we do not lose heart. That is what Paul said to the Corinthians. We know that we travel on God's road, given access to it by his Son. We know that the ministry we have, the taking of the good news to others, is not something we have dreamed up for ourselves, or presumptuously taken on our own shoulders. It is given us by God. We know that with his help we are learning to go about our pilgrimage and our ministry in the way that pleases him: openly, honestly, lovingly. And so we do not lose heart, even if it seems our human strength is being used up, even when we live among a religiously apathetic society, even when it seems that we are always going to be a very small voice unlikely to be heard in the cacophony of voices that surround us.

We do not lose heart. Even when disaster after disaster happens in the world and we are called upon to be shocked, to pray, to give in any way we can. It can seem pointless. It can seem too much, but with God it is not. With God there will come help and meaning, the cutting of the cords, which is so subtle that we might miss that moment when the change occurs.

We do not lose heart. We know it's all going to be worth it. Our outward nature may waste away - let's face it, we all get older! But our inner nature, our trust in God, is being strengthened by the very trials that come our way. It is only when you use a muscle that it grows strong, and only when we have adversity that makes us lean on our faith in God, that our faith can develop in strength. And so, as we seek to live God's way, do God's ministry, which means service, even when we are misunderstood, or people turn and try to actively speak or work against us, we do not lose heart, because it is all going to be worth it. And why?

The Lord is righteous. God will always be faithful to us. We can see what those who would oppose the gospel, actively or passively, cannot see. We are in a situation like Elisha was when his servant could only see the Aramean army surrounding them, but Elisha, with the eyes of faith, could see horses and chariots of fire between the enemy forces and themselves. We can see what is really happening, and when we cannot see it, we have seen it often enough to trust that God will still be righteous, and maintain right relationships with those who are his children and his beloved creation. We can see that in the cross, God has cut the cords of the plough, the threshing sledge which is supposed to crush and annihilate us. And so, even though the earth should move, as another psalm says, we know that we can trust God, that if we persevere in our trust, he will not let us down.

Amen.