

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

PSALM 123

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Sunday 6th February 2011

Matthew 5:33-48

If you have a dog, or have ever had one, or enjoyed playing with someone else's dog, you will know that most dogs love the game of fetch. They love to run after the ball or stick you throw for them, and bring it back. And how do they know when to run and where? They never have to spend long looking around for the thrown object, because they keep their eyes fixed on it, watching your hand as you pull back your arm to throw. When you release the object that is their cue to run, run, run and fetch.

Our Psalm doesn't talk about dogs but about people. In a culture where every second person was some sort of servant, everyone knew that good servants must keep their eyes on their master, to second-guess his commands before they are even spoken. The good maid would read her mistresses' mind and fetch the things likely to be needed before they were called for. Good servants were constantly in attendance, in the presence of those they served.

In putting himself in the position of a good servant, our Psalmist tells pilgrims what their attitude towards God should be, their posture, the way we are to regard our God. We are not to look down on him. Yes, the New Testament tells us that God is a servant God, who sent even his own Son to save and save us at the cost of his life. But he did not do this so that we could assume ourselves to be the masters of God, so that we could think it possible that we should order God around. Yet sometimes in our prayers we may find ourselves coming perilously close to this position. But we are not to look down on God.

Nor are we to look at God as our equal. Yes, Jesus, God's Son came to bring all who will respond to him into God's family. We too are God's sons and daughters, and Jesus is our brother. But we are not in this way God's equals. We do not look directly across at God.

No, we are to look up. We look up to him who is enthroned in the heavens. That's not geographical information about where God lives. It is theological information about God's greatness. We look up to him. He is our master, and we are the servants, learning the art of serving from following Jesus.

The author to the Hebrews, in one of my favourite verses, urges us to be "looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2) We are servants whose job it is to serve. The attitude we have is one of servitude. As God's children we need to do what the mystics call "practising the presence of God."

It's a strange phrase and sounds like doing our piano or tennis practice: something we do to attain the end of improving in a skill. And maybe it is not for from that. If we practice being in God's presence, attending to his desires, doing his will, we will get better at it, even though, as with anything else, the more we learn, the more we will realise that we need to keep learning.

So what do we do? For some people practising the presence of God means asking themselves at every turn, "What would Jesus do?" That can be a useful question to ask, and a useful way into reminding ourselves to live in God's presence and in God's will. But it is also a question which should be used with care, for it can be a dangerous question. In the minutiae of our lives, we very often do not know precisely what Jesus would do, since he lived his life, not ours, in his time and place, and direct parallels do not always exist. And so, if we are not careful too often we make Jesus do what we would like. When I was in High School, the R.E. teacher wanted us to consider the question: Would Jesus join CND? That was something I had never thought about before and thinking then I remember saying to myself: How could he? Nuclear weaponry wasn't a

problem then. So would he join now? Maybe, but Jesus wasn't much one for joining groups. And that doesn't mean that we can't be group members.

And perhaps the best place to find the guidelines about what Jesus would do is in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel. There we find what Jesus said about love and hatred, about giving and caring, about forgetting one's own wishes and working for the good of others. Asking what would Jesus do, is a good reminder question, so long as we aren't too cocksure about the answer.

Another way of practising the presence of God is to find a way to be more constantly in prayer. Some people like to repeat the Jesus prayer over and over at times when they can. They pray a prayer based on the words of blind Bartimaeus: "Jesus Christ, son of the most High God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Doing this keeps you reminded that you are in God's presence. It's a good reminder of the prayer in our psalm as well, asking God to have mercy. Others make reminders for themselves by marking their watch face, or setting an alarm to go off regularly and remind them to pray, to practice the presence of God.

When we pray, what do we pray? Our psalm tells us that too, three times in its short verses it calls out to God to have mercy. The psalmist knows that others who are set over him: maybe he is a tenant farmer, maybe a servant of some kind- others who are set over him seem to despise him. That can be a consequence of having a defined class system. It shouldn't be. Where there are human strata in society, Noblesse Oblige should be the motto of those who are set over others. Noblesse oblige: because they have been given a higher place they should be careful to use their rank to help others. But too often this is not how it works out. We see it still in the very strong remnants of the class system in this country, where noblesse has become defined by and large by riches, and where too often the richer in society simply do not know how the other people on whom they depend live. We see it in India, where legislation provided for the doing away of the caste system, so that no one should be thought of as untouchable any more. Ah, but you can't legislate thousands of years of presupposition away just like that.

As part of his January reflection, which I received this week, our friend Peter Millar writes:

Far beyond the Arab world, In Asia and in Africa, we see ordinary children, women, and men beginning to question the oppressive structures which they have endured for generations. In the villages of South India for example, oppression and the violation of basic human rights continues to be a daily reality for millions of Dalit people. And in that situation, the upper-castes continue to do everything in their power, including murder, to retain the status quo. Perhaps it is true to say that throughout the world, and given the population increase, more human beings are suffering oppression than ever before.

Our psalmist is fed up with being despised, and with doing the work of those who are at ease, but he does not ask for freedom, he asks for mercy, and the mercy he asks for is the mercy of being given service. He looks up to God and asks him to become involved with him. The prayer for mercy is asking God not to give us what we deserve, but to become involved with our lives. The Psalmist has realised that human relationships which exclude God will never be anything but bondage and destruction. So he asks for God to be involved in his life, he asks nothing better than to be God's servant.

If we are learning to live as pilgrim people then this should be our prayer. We ask for mercy: the mercy of being given service. We do not ask for what we want, but for mercy. We look up to God and ask him to become involved with us. His service is freedom - that's the paradox. As Christians we reject the cry for freedom which the world pursues, but never finds, (although we will always spend ourselves working for the freedom of others) and instead we recognise that the answer to the feelings of being trapped or despised which we all know is not to achieve a hypothetical freedom, but to learn service under a better master. God in his mercy allows us to serve him, him who knows our every need and never asks of us more than he can help us do.

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us.
Amen.