

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

PSALM 120

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 9th January 2011

Matthew 3:1-17

When Jesus came to John in the Jordan he asked for baptism, just like everyone else who was coming. John knew that Jesus had no sin which he needed to repent from, and so he objected to the idea of baptising his cousin. Baptism was a washing away of sin, a turning from the wrong way to the right way, and Jesus had no need to turn. But Jesus insisted. "It is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." He said, or, as the Good News Bible puts it "And we shall do all that God requires." What did he mean by that?

When the ancient Hebrew people sang psalm 120, and intoned that they were and alien in Meshech and lived among the tents of Kedar, they referred to far off and hostile peoples. People who lived in a way that was alien to what the Hebrew law told was right, people who were a byword for unsettled, violent, troublesome ways of life. Physically the Hebrews had never lived among them, but they had that feeling that even where they lived, in the promised land, they were living in a culture of unpredictable, unsafe wildness and savagery. And their cry, their song, their longing was "That sort of world is not my home, and I want out." What did they mean by that?

We are starting into the New Year. For those of us involved with children as parents and grandparents, as teachers and neighbours we know that tomorrow the school term starts again and life in many ways returns to normal after the Christmas holidays. It is at these times of transition in the patterns of life that we need task ourselves just what we want "normal" to mean. Do we want to return to the old patterns of life, or do we want more than that? Are we content to dither along the way that we have been doing, doing the best we can, or do we want better than that? We make our resolutions at the beginning of a year, we say that this year we are going to change, to do better at this or that. What do we mean by that?

The psalm that we read today is the first of the psalms of ascent: songs which were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem on the thrice-yearly journeys to festivals in Jerusalem. Over the next few months we are going to look at these psalms - maybe not in unrelieved sequence, but we are going to look at them – to try to learn from what they have to tell us. Some are familiar, well-loved psalms while others, like this one, are less well-known and harder to understand. We don't know if the psalms are recorded in the order in which they were usually sung, but certainly the first of them, this Psalm 120 and the last of them, Psalm 134 would seem to mark the beginning and the ending of a journey.

When Jesus came to John for baptism, he was not turning away from any sin, but he was marking a new phase in his life: he was leaving private life behind and beginning his ministry. He was deliberately beginning the journey that would lead him all the way to Calvary. His being baptised did several things. It showed his identification with us, with sinful humanity, marking how he would in the end take our sin on himself. But it also showed that he was setting his face to live in God's way. He was setting out on a journey. He had nothing from which he needed to repent, but he did need to show people that he was setting his face to live God's way, and so he did.

When we become Christians, whenever that is – as children or much later in life, we are setting out on a journey. Too often in this world we think that we can do a thing once, have the experience and that is all there is to it. But the Christian life is not a moment of instant gratification. It is a journey, a journey in which, as the old formula tells us, we have to battle with the world, the flesh and the devil. In other worlds we have to wrestle with temptations to do wrong – that is the devil; with our own selfish desires – that is the flesh; and with the world.

The world. What that means in concrete fact changes from age to age and with geography. The idea and the ideas of the world are like these transformer toys that some children like so much, shape-changers, coming to

us in different guises. They are drunk in by us with our mother's milk, breathed in by us daily in our intercourse with others and our assimilation of the subtly changing received wisdom of the age. The World, in this sense "is an atmosphere, a mood. It is nearly as hard for a sinner to recognize the world's temptations as for a fish to discover impurities in the water. There is a sense, a feeling, that things aren't right, that the environment is not whole, but just what it is eludes analysis." When we stop to consider –as we don't do often enough, we know that the spiritual atmosphere in which we live acts like sandpaper on our faith, seeking to rub it away, to smooth its cutting edges. The culture which we breathe in each waking moment is one which seems to dissipate hope and corrupt love, but it is hard to put our finger on just how and when. It is hard to spell out what is fundamentally wrong.

John the Baptist tried to put his finger on what was wrong with the world in his time and place. He pointed at spiritual superiority, at the feeling that with Abraham in the family tree (and all Jews have Abraham in the family tree) God was somehow obliged to cherish you. He pointed out that whatever was wrong you needed to turn around and stop doing it, so that you could live in God's way instead. He was a little taken aback when Jesus took his words seriously.

The Psalmist sees that the problem with his world begins with lies. He starts his psalm by recording his feelings of distress. And he ends it by saying that despite his urging to the contrary, those around him are for war, not peace. That is the feeling of his age. So there is much to cause distress. Like so many of the psalms, this song is an honest one, and necessary if we are not to live in a bubble of pretence that all is well with the world.

Perhaps one of the lies which we are spun most often is that all is basically well with the world, with just a few aberrations. We are told as children that people are fundamentally nice and good, that everyone is born equal and innocent and self-sufficient. We are led to believe that the world is a pleasant, harmless place. We are taught that if we don't experience the world in this way then somehow it is because we haven't gone about life right, and that a little more effort or time on our part can correct things.

We are taught this, but never in so many words. When I say it like that, when I put some of the feeling of the World for our age into words like that you can no doubt pick out the theological lack of truth that I am speaking. You can consider the doctrine of original sin; that we are not fundamentally innocent, but part of the rebellion of the world against God. You can remember that Jesus had to die on a cross because the world is fundamentally not right and needed God's power to put it right again. You can recall that this world is not for ever and that it is only in the world to come that we are promised perfection: as a gift of God, not a reward for our effort.

But we are told the lie as the background to everything, from the assumption that happiness can be bought or made, to the children's tales about super-heroes. Running through the world that we live in is the assumption that *it is up to us*. When it is not. It is up to God.

Because it is up to God, our psalm calls for the glowing coals of the broom tree. Glowing coals, in Scripture are a sign of purification. Isaiah experiences it when in God's presence he laments that he is of unclean lips and comes from a people of unclean lips, and an angel brings a glowing coal to purify his tongue. God provides the purification. It is up to God. This psalm, the first of the psalms of pilgrimage is one of turning away from what is wrong and turning towards what is right. It is not a comfortable psalm, not one which is often sung nowadays: I had to look through about 20 hymn books before I found a version of it for us to sing.

The psalm begins with distress, and often we know distress as we seek to live as God's children in the world. We know distress and we can't always put our finger on what is upsetting to us. We know that things are not quite right and we don't know if the wrongness is in us or around us – or both. "Deliver me from lying lips" cries the psalmist and we aren't told whose lips these are: his own or someone else's. But we do know where he turns and we do know where we too should turn. The Psalmist turns to God. Without this turning to God, this psalm would be a bleak piece of lamentation indeed. But the psalmist takes his troubled mind to God and so light is shined on his life, his difficulty, his discontent. He understands, or begins to understand, what is wrong, that he is being spun lies by those around him: in his case lies that the best way out of trouble is through war. He understand and so he is able to begin the pilgrim journey, which is repentance, a turning from what is wrong, and turning towards God

When we seek to follow in God's way we learn from this Psalm. Fundamental to our learning and growing as God's pilgrim people is turning towards him, at all times. When we are in distress, even if we can't identify what is worrying us, we are to take our trouble to God, and God will shine the light of his truth upon us. Jesus shows us that the pilgrim journey of godliness begins with a deliberate act of turning to God. If this is the year when we are not going to be content to go along with what always has been, what the world insinuates in our ear as the best way to think and be, then this is a year that must begin with repentance. But not just begin that way. The deliberate turning to God that is repentance is something we must practice daily, hourly. If we, as the writer to the Hebrews says "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" then we can be sure that God will do his bit and free us from the lies and distress so that we can follow closer to him.

Amen.