

Sermon Archive 174

Sunday 5 November, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Psalm 34: 1-10, 22

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Play the video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiWomXklfv8>

The video clip was a performance of Ralph McTell's song, "Streets of London", with images of London Street people, and an interview in which Ralph noted that the characters in his song might be found in any city around the world. He noted that the song would most certainly outlive him. I wanted to put his song next to another song which outlived its composer, Psalm 34 - a song referencing the saints of God.

-ooOoo-

A song that has outlived the one who wrote it. A song to make you think again. A song about people, in their vulnerability and ordinariness. A little psalm of a saint of God. Let me take you by the hand, and lead you round it. Maybe I'll show you something to make you change your mind.

-ooOoo-

Stepping inside the psalm, looking for the saints of God, we find a human being. It's not a song about heaven. It's a world of streets and people, human landscapes. And one of the humans on the landscape says "This poor soul cried, and was heard". Crying and being heard. So where there are tears and a listening response, where there is need and noticing, maybe there we know that saints are present. In the describing of the self in terms of poverty, in the acknowledgement that sometimes we don't have everything we need, in the opening up

of our vulnerabilities, and in the responding to all that with a listening heart, do we find the saints of God?

Stepping inside the psalm we find another human being, “seeking the Lord”. The human being on a search, life as a process of looking, longing, exploring the hidden places for that completing company. Some may be too busy going fast. Some may be locked into black and white, simplified, pre-prepared certainties without nuance or finesse. They don’t think again, because everything’s fixed in place. But the human being in this psalm is seeking the Lord - looking for the mysterious or profound. And in the world of this psalm, that delivers him from all his fears. He may not have all the easy answers; he may not have existence pinned down for simple description. But there is something about “seeking the Lord”, longing for the holy, that deals to the fear. And where fear retreats, where fright is softened, do we perhaps find the saints of God?

Stepping inside the psalm we find another facet of human being - looking to God and being radiant. Radiant. Is that twinkle in the eye? Is it a beaming smile? Is it a heart so encouraged that it shines through the face? Joy, the leaping of the spirit, the beatituding of the human life, “happy are those who . . .” A psalmist sings of radiance leaving no room for shame - be radiant so your faces shall never be ashamed! So where shame is taken away, where dignity is given, where people are proud of whom God has made them, do we there, perhaps, find the saints of God?

Stepping inside the psalm, we find another human being - this one feeling he can’t describe life other than as something like having an angel encamped around him. In the camp, the ever-moving demands of the campaign, the challenge of what feels a bit like a military engagement, someone strong and reliable is with us. In the inevitable fighting that will come upon us, there’s the figure we don’t fully understand, but know we can depend on - and it feels like deliverance, a helper, a strange strength in a time of trouble. So

where protection is offered, where help is given, where assistance empowers the vulnerable amid the fray, do we there, perhaps, find the saints of God?

Stepping inside the psalm, we find another facet of human being, tasting and seeing that God is good. Something like feasting, something like a banquet. Some live life as a kind of exercise in rejection. Reject the flavour. Reject the texture. Reject the smell, reject the colour. Reject the gift. Reject the possibility. Reject the opportunity, reject the pleasure of grace. But here, this human being is tasting and seeing - receiving into him or herself something that is good. Like breaking the bread together and rejoicing in the sharing. Taking into ourselves the goodness of God. This table is not ours - it belongs to God, so all are called to take a place here. Life as tasting and seeing the goodness. So how could you say that you're lonely, and that for you, the sun don't shine? No; where affirmations of goodness are made, where food is shared as a celebration of life, where puritan misery and glumness is shaken away like crumbs flicked from a table cloth, do we there, perhaps, find the saints of God?

Stepping inside the psalm, we find the young lions suffering want and hunger. Young lions? Maybe those who trap and devour human beings; dangerous, predatory creatures that feed by taking away the life of others. Yet for them here, in the world of the psalm, **they** are the wanting and hungering ones. They are the ones whose approach to life (and the taking of life) isn't working - while those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. The ways of violence lead to hunger. The way of "seeking the Lord" leads to plenty. None who take refuge in God will be condemned. So, where the powerful and dangerous are thwarted, where the vulnerable are blessed and fed, do we there, perhaps, find the saints of God? Let me take you by the hand, and lead you through the world of a

psalm. Maybe I'll show you something to make you change your mind.

Back from the world of the psalm we come. Back onto the streets of London, or Paris, or Christchurch. Back into a world where poor souls cry out. Back into a world where people know many forms of fear. Back into a world where people are burdened with shame, people treat them as shameful, no good. Back into a world where in the fight, the vulnerable need protection - the fight's not fair. Back into a world where people are "guilted" about enjoying the good (you don't deserve the good, you are not worthy of pleasure). Back into a world where the lions do tend to succeed in the hunt. Back to where our song is of loneliness and a sun that, for us, don't shine. Have we found something, that maybe can change the mind?

We have found the song of one of the saints of God - someone testifying to a God who enters all of that, and who lives within it, to redeem it, to heal it, through the faith of the saints, to make it better. Will we sing that song?

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name forever. May this be our song. Amen.

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