

## Sermon Archive 192

Sunday 18 March 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 119: 9-16

Psalm 51: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Two psalms. One of a young person, who still imagines that life might be simple. One of someone whom, I suspect, is older and has lived a bit.

The first is exposing of inexperience - and so a bit embarrassing. The second reveals a candour about failure - rather more raw. It's *all* a bit exposing. Maybe that's the nature of psalms: the nature of speaking, from the Lenten heart, to the Lenten God. This is who we are. Into the psalms we go.

-ooOoo-

No, I'm not sure that I'm ready to talk about it. And I'm not sure that talking would be wise just now, because my thoughts are still a wee bit confused - out of order, not lined up. And you don't want to share that kind of half-formed stuff with people - because people remember things, judge things, don't forgive things, and step away - they hide their faces. There's no retrieving of a vulnerability once it's shared. A heart, once opened up, is ever exposed. There really is no way back to the time before the arrow flew. So no, though I'm full of things to say, though I feel constrained, impoverished by reticence - and need to talk, I'm not ready just now to speak to a human. For the moment, I'll write my thoughts down on a piece of paper - a letter to myself - and maybe to God. That just feels safer - less open to being irretrievably stuffed up. I'll write a psalm and give it to God.

-ooOoo-

Hello God. It's me. I'm writing you this psalm because I'm a wee bit frightened, and don't know what to do. I've looked deep within myself, going carefully through my thoughts, like some cartoon detective with a giant magnifying glass. I've strained for the truth within. I've done my secret

search for internal wisdom. Experience. Learning. Getting it right this time? Nothing! Same cycles. Same destructive foibles. It's like I'm in this circle I don't quite know how to get out of. I feel I need the ear, and the mind, of someone wise. And if that One could be kind as well, that'd be good. Compassionate. Because when you pop all your half-formed stuff out there in a poem, even if it's just to the privacy of the human being's God, it's good if the God can be willing to look away from the silliness, from the tangle we present - and not deride, not take leave, not hide the face from this fool . . . Rather, to hear and to stay. To see and maintain relationship. To know deeply, and keep the bountiful spirit extended.

Yeah, within my stuck circle, I need wisdom and non-panicking love. Then maybe I can write my poem, can sing my song.

I've long wished, O God, that things were simple. Like I could just read a "how-to" manual and do what it says. Like I could find the rules in the book and keep them, and find a blessing. Like, in following the statutes, I could emerge out into some automatic rightness of being, some lack of want, some resting well in life. Just read it and do it. Clarity. Obedience. Sureness of way.

But life is not like the reading of a book. There's nothing automatic, prescribed or guaranteed in life. We continue to bang into one another, and not know what to do or say to one another, and confuse times of holding back from times of going forward. And we gather great wages of fear and paralysis from sad experience. We know our transgressions, and our sins are ever before us. And before long, overwhelmed, we're saying, all together, that we're born for this - yes, been wicked from our birth, doomed for darkness, sinners from our mothers' wombs, justly under judgment. Dear God! . . . did I say my thoughts were awkward? I can hardly believe them as they come out of my mouth. Wash me through and through from this. Have mercy on me, O God, in your . . . in your loving-kindness.

Maybe, O God of loving-kindness, maybe part of your purging me of all **this**, part of your putting within me a truth, part of your creating a clean heart for me, is to teach me a new way of seeking your will. You see, in the distant past, when I was young and silly, I wrote poems about **knowing** your will, **doing** your will, **achieving** your will. It was as simple as reading. In these latter old days, with all that having collapsed in an impractical heap, as I've

considered your statutes, I've seen them as reminders to myself of all that I can't do, won't do, have failed to do. I come to them as black-hat judge and jury. I come to them flagellating, wailing and weeping. Is that the cynicism of time?

But what if I came to them with a spirit of wanting to be inspired? With a spirit of "what if" or "why not"? With a remembrance of the loving-kindness from which they sprang and which they seek to serve? What if I came to them, listening for joy and gladness - knowing that joy and gladness are hidden there for me? What if I took it all as a slow, loving, befriending instructing of the heart?

Teach me then, O God, not to take your Word as a rule book for me to read in despair. Teach me, rather, to meditate on your commandments, to delight in them, to treasure in my heart the **promise** within them. Teach me to consider time with them a commitment to befriending. Teach me to ponder another of your psalm singers, One from Nazareth, for whom the Law of the Lord became light, salt, a beautiful tree for the sheltering of many. Teach me to remember him carrying that big, impossibly punishing wooden thing through his wicked world, and yet finding something through it all called "resurrection".

Teach me, O God, not to wallow in what I cannot do, will not get, have not found, have dared not say. But teach me, in the spirit of Jesus, to drink of the bountiful Spirit, to delight in your delight in us, to grow in our capacity to treasure ourselves and one another as you treasure us. The Word did not sit there on the page - it became flesh and dwelled among us. The Word did not condemn - the Word gave life. The Word did not steal - the Word gave. The Word did not leave the broken soul alone - it came again to heal and to hold. And at the end, even in the end, I am healed and held. It is OK.

I think, O God, that that is my psalm for you. I think I've said what I needed to say. And I feel that you also have spoken. I thank you for being wise, open and safe. In my state of un-readiness to talk honestly to another human being, this has been good.

And yet, I cannot hide forever within a world of psalms and songs and safety. You placed me within, have **gifted** me with, a world of human

beings, of human encounters, of human risks. I can't be hiding from it. It's from within exactly **that** that I need to seek the good, express the true, find peace, give peace, receive instruction, grow the new heart. So bless me, O God, that what I have heard and said in this psalm, may give me truth, courage and joy as I move back into engagement with those around me.

If I come across one asking "how shall a young man cleanse his way", make me wise to what he means and needs. What's happened to him, such that cleansing is something he seeks? If in a conversation, I scratch the surface, and hear one saying "I'm a sinner from my mother's womb", give me lips for the speaking of correcting love. If in observing two friends, I see one in emotional need, and the other not understanding, give me a right spirit to call for the ministration of love. If I see one hanging back in fear and vulnerability, give me the sharing of courage. If I see one lonely, give me a face that doesn't turn away. Let whatever promise you have sown in my being, make me an agent of your saving help, a doer of your Word. In the home, in the supermarket, in the place of learning - in the arena of public discourse, in the shelter, on the street - equip us to love, to speak and to act from instructed hearts - from wisdom that is grown from delighting in the depths of the Word. Where commandments and rules will never do the job, where the circle feels like a trap, where pleading words of poets and songsters are too much like arrows we're afraid to fire, put a right spirit within us and cleanse our hearts.

-ooOoo-

That is where the sermon ends. Along our Lenten way, it's a simple reminder that we people, full of our poetry and embarrassing, exposing hope, sometimes will fail to do or say what's important and right. Commandments won't suffice, and we'll depart from the way. But, according to God's voice in the psalms, God, in loving-kindness, will slowly instruct our hearts - putting within us a longing that things should be well. And God will place beyond Holy Week and the cross, and our getting it wrong (the foot within the mouth), the promise of life and light. Young and old, bold or defeated, the people of God meet the loving-kindness of God.

Along our Lenten way, we keep a moment of quiet.

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