

I Kings 2: 10-12; 3: 3-14

Psalm 111

Pentecost 13 2024.

Ephesians 5: 15-20

St. John 6: 51-58

“The works of [God’s] hands are faithful and just.” Psalm 111: 7

We read the psalms every Sunday as a worshipping congregation, but most Anglican preachers don’t spend a lot of time preaching about the psalms. Most of us have a few favourites – Psalm 23 (“The Lord’s My Shepherd”) or Psalm 121 (“My help comes from the Lord”); and we know that Jesus often quoted from the psalms...

Psalms more often have a liturgical function – that is, we pray them during certain times in the order of our worship; Anglicans and many other Christians say or sing psalm selections. The Book of Psalms was the first hymn book of the Christian Church...

I suggest that we dig into the psalms a little more. After all, they are included in the canon of the Bible. These readings are poetic and powerful!... The psalmists are passionate about God; sometimes they are as frustrated as heck with God! Sometimes the psalmists are full of the joy of the Lord; at other times, they seem to be hanging on to life like a rock-climber clinging to the edge of a cliff by his fingernails...

Some of the psalms are meant to disturb us; to unsettle us a bit – just like poetry today. It’s a mistake, I suggest, to skip over biblical material which we find unsettling or disturbing. Sometimes, we need to be unsettled or disturbed, and we need to wrestle through that...

Here’s an example: Psalm 137 was written during the time of Babylonian exile. The Babylonian army had invaded the province of Judah. The Babylonian army had invaded the temple in Jerusalem and desecrated it! Then the Babylonians had taken almost all the Jewish people of Judah, and had scattered them away from the land, so the Jews wouldn’t get together and rebel against their conquerors... It’s impossible to overstate how terrible an experience that was for the Jewish people to be taken from their ancestral homeland. Hadn’t God promised this land to them? Who were these evil Babylonian pagans, who had done unspeakable things in the temple, and who had scattered the Jews to Babylonia and other places?...

Psalm 137 begins, “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Zion.” (Zion was the mountain Jerusalem was built on...) Verse 4: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?...”

Then, the psalmist begins to think about the Babylonian invaders, and his blood begins to boil. He hates what the invaders have done! He wants revenge...

Psalm 137 ends, “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!...” Eew! Gross!... The psalmist wants the Babylonian little kids to be killed! How can that be in the Bible?... (In fact, this verse was so disturbing, the compilers of our present Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* edited out that verse. It’s a dangerous road, though, when we begin to edit out Bible verses which offend our present sensibilities...) There is no confusing the psalmist’s rage; and of course, the psalmist didn’t have the gift of Jesus Christ, who shows us the better way...

So, what about today’s psalm – Psalm 111? Happily, it’s a much more positive psalm: The psalmist gives praise to God because of God’s virtues: The psalmist praises God for his work, his righteousness; the psalmist highlights God’s mercy, faithfulness, trustworthiness and justice. The psalm recalls that God cares for his people and provides them with food and a community of faith!... In summary, the psalmist recalls God’s *integrity*. Integrity... The psalmist values God’s faithfulness to the principles of the universe; for God’s character...

Like the psalmist, it’s appropriate that we cherish God’s character, his integrity... I encourage us to be grateful to God – not just for how many blessings we can count, (although that is wonderful too) – but because of the goodness and righteousness of God. In the words of a Christian chorus, “Our God is an awesome God. He reigns from heaven above, in wisdom, power and love. Our God is an awesome God.” Like the psalmist, let’s respond in praise!... The God whom we worship is righteous and praise-worthy; not because of *our* agenda, but because of who God is...

There’s one more thing to notice about Psalm 111. The psalmist ends by talking about *people*: “All those who practice [wisdom] have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever.”

We are called to respond to God’s righteousness and integrity by our own lives. We’re called to develop the gift of wisdom (like King Solomon did, in today’s first reading). We too are called to live lives of honesty and integrity. This is not earning God’s favour by being a good person; rather, it’s leading a life of gratitude *in response* to what God has done for us through Jesus Christ...

When Church leaders or followers cheat or lie, that reflects badly on us all. For example (I’m sorry to say), a distant relative of mine, who was ordained, got hired to lead an African-Canadian advocacy group in Nova Scotia. Concern was expressed that she had been hired, but she is not of African-Canadian ancestry. Then it emerged that she had lied substantially on her resume. When confronted, she replied to the media (identifying herself as the Rev. So-and-so), “Of course I lied on my resume! Everybody does it!” In the end, she was terminated from the position – but not only did it reflect poorly on her; it also reflected poorly on the judgement of the Church who had selected her for leadership.

The examples vary, but if someone self-identifies as a follower of Jesus, but does not act and speak with integrity, that reflects poorly on us all, and dishonours the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ himself... Like the character of God himself, we are called to lead lives of integrity, honesty and humility. When we are open to God, the Holy Spirit himself will help us, to “lead us into all truth.” This is not being good in the hope that God will love us. Instead, humbly confident in God’s mercy and loving-kindness to us all, shown supremely in Jesus Christ, we intend to live for God’s glory, and in response, to reflect God’s character in our own lives...

When we read the psalms, let’s not be careless and just skim over them. Let’s meditate on them; engage with them; wrestle with them. Psalm 118: 19 reads,

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may go into them, and give thanks to the Lord.

May it be so, Lord.
Amen.