

God of our Salvation

Readings: Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 & 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

My last parish in England was prosaically named St Stephen in the Banks. It got that name because the village of Banks was settled behind two massive land banks which protected the land and its inhabitants from the ravages of the Irish Sea. Banks was a village of some 5000 people which was surrounded by a plethora of farms and was famous for its tomatoes in summer and Brussel sprouts in winter!

The highlight of the Church's year for some people was the annual Harvest Festival in the early autumn. Teams of people came to decorate the Church with displays of fresh produce and beautiful flowers. Being a rural parish no tinned or packaged food was allowed over the threshold! We sang the traditional Harvest hymns like 'Come, ye thankful people, come ...', 'Praise, O praise our God and King ...' and Harvest Thanksgiving would never be complete without a lusty rendition of 'We plough the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land...'

For the good folk of Banks Harvest began back in the cold days of January when we observed Plough Sunday. Traditionally the first Sunday after Epiphany, the farmers used to carry in a traditional plough into the Church and as their Vicar, I would normally say a prayer like:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: for in your abundant care you have given us fertile land, rich soil, the seasons in their courses. You provide seed for sowing, water, light and warmth to bring forth the miracle of growth. You give us skill to work the land, to prepare and nourish it, that it may be fruitful. By your blessing, let this plough be a sign of all that you promise to us. Prosper the work of our hands, and provide abundant crops for your people to share. Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Blessed be God for ever.

To which everyone responded:

"God speed the plough. God speed the plough!"

Sadly the concept of a Harvest Thanksgiving has dropped off the radar in the modern Church. I just hope we haven't forgotten to say thank you to God for his abundant generosity.

At Harvest the psalm we used was 65, our first reading this morning. It is this psalm I want us to look at as part of your series on the Book of Psalms. The verse I have selected as a text comes from the middle of the psalm. In verse 5 we read these words:

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. Psalm 65:5.

The Book of Psalms is a treasure house of spiritual teaching. No wonder the psalms have inspired many people to write hymns for use in worship. How impoverished would we be without 'The Lord's My Shepherd' for example. And then there is the less familiar Harvest hymn 'To thee, O Lord our hearts we raise in hymns of adoration.' That hymn by William Chatterton Dix from the 19th century was directly inspired by our psalm 65. The first verse ends this way,

*... bright robes of gold the fields adorn,
the hills with joy are ringing,
the valleys stand so thick with corn
that even they are singing.*

Psalm 65 was written for use at the sanctuary and later on in the temple. The Jewish people still to this day have two harvest festivals each year, one around May/June known to us as Pentecost and the other in October, known as the Feast of Tabernacles. The Psalm comes in three discernible sections and I will look at these in turn. Inspired by the Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner I will give each section its own title. So, verses 1-4, we might headline, 'God of Grace.'

GOD OF GRACE

King David dedicated this section to the leader or the director of music. 'Praise' is the first word out of the psalmists' mouth as it should be from ours. Zion, the holy hill of worship ought to be echoing with the praises of the living God. Zion, the place where promises were to be made and kept in honour of the living God who loves to answer prayer; Zion, the place of hope; Zion, the place of forgiveness; Zion, the place of acceptance and Zion the place of eternal satisfaction and spiritual goodness.

May I ask you this question? When you come to the Church on the Hill for worship is praise the first word on your lips? To offer praise, even with a heavy heart, helps to put all else into perspective. Praise acknowledges the greatness and the bounty of God especially with the gift of forgiveness. A Church which praises God sees God in action. So like the psalmist, can you say: Holy Trinity, the place where promises were to be made and kept in honour of the living God who loves to answer prayer; Holy Trinity, the place of hope; Holy Trinity, the place of forgiveness; Holy Trinity, the place of acceptance and Holy Trinity the place of eternal satisfaction and spiritual goodness?

I pray so because all the attributes of a Godly Church which I have just outlined demonstrate that we do indeed worship the God of Grace whose greatest act of grace was the sacrifice of his dear Son so that we may all rise with him in glory.

GOD OF MIGHT

If the first section of the psalm shows us the God of Grace then the middle part demonstrates that we adore the God of might.

A God who is the Creator is a mighty God indeed. God's might is not the might of a vengeful warrior but of a loving heavenly Father. I do not believe that God is both Creator and Destroyer, the two are mutually exclusive in divine terms in my book. For example, I do not believe that God sends illness or death in order to punish or correct a person. Illness and death are part and parcel of being human, our incarnation if you like. When trials of ill health present themselves to us then God promises to be in the midst of the pain not Lording it over us with a vindictive grin! Jesus died for the extent of human sin and that death was all-sufficient.

The psalmist underlines the spiritual truth that our God is a God of deliverance or righteousness and is become our salvation. Therefore we of all people need to have hope embedded in our hearts, hope that gives us the inspiration to sing out with joy and excitement. We see that hope in Jesus.

Looking up to the top of a high mountain can take our breath away but acknowledging the Creator behind it all gives breath to our praises.

"Peace be still" Jesus rebuked the waves on stormy Galilee and in doing so illustrated the psalmists words, 'You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.' If Jesus the Agent of Creation can still the waters he can still the deep waters of our troubled souls so that we may know the gifts of real peace. Praise doesn't have to be noisy. Praise can come from a silent heart at peace because the spirit of the Prince of Peace dwells there. Now that is a truly mighty thought.

GOD OF PLENTY

The final portion of the Psalm might very well be headlined, 'God of Plenty.' We do not worship and serve a mean God, rather we worship and serve a God of abundance and plenty. The lovely words of the much loved Harvest hymn illustrate this:

*Come, ye thankful people, come,
raise the song of harvest-home:
all be safely gathered in,
ere the winter storms begin;
God, our Maker, doth provide
for our wants to be supplied;*

*come to God's own temple, come;
raise the song of harvest-home!*

The author, a former Dean of Canterbury Cathedral Henry Alford, was inspired by the teachings of Jesus especially the parable of the seed. That parable illustrates just how generous God is and how much his Word will take root in the fertile soil of peoples' hearts. But there are other examples of God's abundance aren't there? You contemplate on the account of the loaves and fishes and you will soon see what I mean.

This psalm, like all the rest illustrates that the God we love and serve is the only God of grace, of might and of plenty. It ends with that glorious picture of the whole earth combining in the praises of God as the people of God unite in service and adoration. God has provided and now it is up to us to ensure that all people share of the bounty which flows from the heart of God and the highpoint of that is Jesus.

Amen.