

TALK FOR CAREY, CHRISTIAN AID SUNDAY, 15.5.22, PS. 128, MATT 25:31-46

GOD'S KINGDOM – FOR US ?

Psalm 128 is another short song of ascent. The average length of these Psalms is just 6 verses. Some are even shorter. Only one has more than 10 verses. The writers of these Psalms knew that pilgrims, at the end of a very long journey, were not up to singing very long songs.

A simple, uncomplicated Psalm. But if it's not a very action-packed Psalm, it is nonetheless packed with an overwhelming sense of blessing & abundance. It has a very tight, close-up focus. At the heart of this Psalm is a picture of a multi-generational family gathered around a meal table. A bit like a family BBQ. As I thought about this Psalm, I was reminded of a big family photo that has pride of place in Margaret Clark's flat. Four generations of one family, on a sunny day in the garden, gathered to celebrate her 90th birthday. Hallelujah !

This is a Psalm laden with a sense of blessing & abundance & fruitfulness. This is what all the pilgrims are hoping and praying for, as they visit God's holy place. They are looking for their families to share in the prosperity of Jerusalem. To taste God's goodness in a place full of significance for the people of God. As the apostle Paul puts it, 'godliness with contentment is great gain'.

This obscure Psalm should stand alongside Psalm 23 in level of importance. That's because there is something deeply fundamental about this human hope that our families will be blessed. I love the way today's Christian Aid video ends with Janet's prayer for her family. And I love the joy we have had recently of sharing in two infant dedications. Augustina brought her daughter, Afriyie. Olivia brought her son, Lucas. Praise God!.

And yet... Yes, here's the thing. Alongside this picture of God's desire to bestow overwhelming blessing, there is the stark reality of our world today. On this CA Sunday, once again we cannot avoid this uncomfortable truth: The fact that too many people today do not have a share in the blessing of prosperity. Too many people hardly get a sniff of it... How is this right ? I challenge you to spend time reflecting upon this. And at the same time to reflect on Jesus' uncomfortable parable of the sheep and the goats. It is impossible for us to miss God's sense of outrage at this enduring and scandalous injustice.

The prosperity of Jerusalem... What about the prosperity of London ? Built partly on profits made from the slave trade. Built on a system of trade which has entrenched this unbalanced sharing of the earth's resources.

We rightly feel righteous anger about what is happening in Ukraine. But Putin's side-kick Lebedev, did have something when he pointed to the history of western powers interfering in other countries, for their own gain. Before we attempt to pull the plank out of the eye of our brother, Putin, we should first attempt to pull the plank out of our own eye. Yes, it was right for the yachts of Russian oligarchs to be seized. But what about the just as shamelessly luxurious yachts of western multi-millionaires ? Am I talking 'the politics of envy ?'. No, this is the politics of God's Kingdom - everyone having a share.

This Christian Aid Week, this charity which we support each year, has rightly highlighted the campaign for a properly financed fund for 'losses and damages'. This fund was unfinished business at Glasgow's COP26 last year. This fund will make sure that the poorest people of the world are given the finances to restore the colossal damage they face from being on the frontline of climate change. People in Bangladesh & the South Sea Islands & many African nations, for example. And each of us here can support this campaign by filling in and sending a postcard to our government. (These cards are on the last page of these devotional guides produced by CA for this coming week).

But let's not get too carried away with the bigger picture. This very quickly gets controversial. Rather, we should learn the lesson of Psalm 128. Let's bring the focus back to one family. To the family of Janet in Zimbabwe. Yes, it is very encouraging to see that, thanks to the work of CA's partners there, Janet is now able - at last - to feed her family. Thanks to drought-resistant crops and some different farming techniques.

But we need to remind ourselves of what Janet has been through. Because many more families, in many countries, are still facing similar challenges right now... Here's one day from Janet's story. Janet remembers a particularly difficult year, when all the crops failed, due to climate change. Week after week she was really afraid that her family would starve to death. And she knew they were in deep trouble one day. She had managed to make porridge for her family. And she put down a bowl of porridge for the dogs to eat. The children quickly picked up that bowl, because they were still hungry.

Janet's family is remarkable. One of the reasons that her family was chosen for this video, was because there are four generations in the family. But this is rare in Zimbabwe. We shouldn't forget that some of the children and young people in this family are orphans. They have already lost their parents to starvation and disease. That's why Janet feels this keen responsibility to feed and look after her extended (and extending) family. This is not a story which sits comfortably with the picture of Psalm 128.

Our conclusion is unavoidable. God's desire for the abundance of creation & the blessing of all peoples of all nations is being thwarted. Too many are shut out. Too many are starving & thirsty. Too many parents are wondering where the next meal will come from. Too many children are going to bed hungry.

When we see someone who is hungry or thirsty or poorly or naked or imprisoned and we do something to help, that's when we see the Kingdom of God in action. When we give to CA this week, that is the Kingdom of God in action. And when we fill in the post-card to our government, calling for a bigger share for the poor - this is also the Kingdom of God at work.

Here is the table of the LORD, set for a feast for all the nations. Our God wants to share the Kingdom with us. And, as we know from Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet, God wants as many people as possible to come to this table. Our God wants for all who share in this vision of compassion and justice to come and take their place. Here we receive God's abundant blessing, given to us through Christ our Saviour. Here we share with each other God's richest food and drink: God's overwhelming love for us and for all creation. And here we follow Jesus, in laying down our lives for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Let us keep the feast. Thanks be to God...