

## Sermon for Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 (Trinity 11)

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom' from Fr. Mike

### Readings:

- 1 Kings 2.10-12; 3. 3-14
- **Psalm 111**
- Ephesians 5.15-20
- John 6. 51-58

Firstly, please read the following Psalm 111 (in blue below) which is appointed for this day. It is the focus of my words this morning, and hopefully provides a launching pad for reflection. As St. Paul also advises us today, '**See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise**' (Ephesians 5.15)

Confitebor tibi

(I will confess to you O Lord)

1. I WILL give thanks unto the Lord with my whole heart: secretly among the faithful, and in the congregation.
2. The works of the Lord are great: sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.
3. His work is worthy to be praised and had in honour: and his righteousness endureth for ever.
4. The merciful and gracious Lord hath so done his marvellous works: that they ought to be had in remembrance.
5. He hath given meat unto them that fear him: he shall ever be mindful of his covenant.
6. He hath shewed his people the power of his works: that he may give them the heritage of the heathen.
7. The works of his hands are verity and judgement: all his commandments are true.
8. They stand fast for ever and ever: and are done in truth and equity.
9. He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever; holy and reverend is his Name.
10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do thereafter; the praise of it endureth for ever.

We are a people who respect and enjoy the 1662 'Book of Common Prayer'(BCP). Jesus also used a (much older) prayer book, known as the 'Psalms'. The full collection of 150 psalms are remarkable poems which neatly express the whole gamut of human experience and emotion in every generation, including our own. This timeless reality is why we carefully retain them in our present worship, as does every Christian, Jew, and Muslim. So, why has this particular Psalm been specifically chosen for us all this week?

Those who determine our lectionary are all too aware that every time we enter into a relationship with the God of the Bible, it is truly a high calling. It is often a dangerous, mostly reverent and sometimes fearful relationship. There are occasionally sacrificial demands and 'fearful' consequences.

Coronavirus pandemic means we still cannot literally use our voices to 'sing' in guaranteed safety as a congregation. However, the psalms provide a very special and consistent gift – they all cut through this apparent restriction and allow us to reflect, pray and indeed 'sing' in our hearts, as many of our ancestors have faithfully done during times of testing and hardship.

It is interesting to note that Psalms 111, 112 and 119 are the only psalms which are 'acrostic' by phrase in the Bible; that is, each 7-9 syllable phrase begins with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. So what? Well, Psalm 111 is classified by scholars as an 'Individual Hymn of Thanksgiving' - a psalm type in which the singer gives thanks for God's goodness in delivering him/her from various life-threatening situations such as illness, oppression, or enemy attack. All these things are salient for us today. Wherever you are (in spirit or geographically) and whatever your

personal circumstances, you may 'give thanks unto the Lord' drawing comfort as you do so that others are also engaging in their own way.

The words of thanks by this individual worshiper are unusual, however, for they recount not an event of God's deliverance of an individual, but rather God's deliverance of an entire community.

In the traditional form, the Hebrew alphabet is an 'abjad' (consisting only of consonants) written from right to left. It has 22 letters, five of which use different forms at the end of a word. The structure of Psalm 111 is revealing, because our scholars have recognised that it is a very succinct and clever (acrostic) poem consisting of twenty-two phrases, each of which begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (Please bear with me, I hope you have not fallen asleep yet?!)

In just 72 words, the psalmist cleverly condenses the complete history of God's deliverance of ancient Israel! The breakdown is worthy of our reflection today, and looks like this:

### **Verse 1: Is a Vow to Give Thanks**

This opening verse suggests the words of an individual worshiper giving thanks to God in a public setting of worship. However, this is not the same as saying private prayers in public. Most commentators agree that there is no significant difference between an individual, a small group of faithful people, and an entire congregation if they are all giving thanks to God. The key is to do it unconditionally - with your 'whole heart'.

**I WILL give thanks unto the Lord with my whole heart: secretly among the faithful, and in the congregation.**

### **Verses 2-4: Praises the deeds of the Lord**

Here God's 'marvellous works' or 'wonderful deeds' means something beyond human comprehension, translated from the Hebrew word *niphla'oth*. Something truly remarkable and striking. That which is way beyond our intelligence or imagination, such as the exodus from Egypt, which describes the crossing of the Red Sea; the famous Ten Plagues; and God providing water and manna in the desert. The phrase 'merciful and gracious' echoes Exodus Chapter 34.6, declaring the two main attributes given to Moses empowering his vocation to lead the people of Israel appropriately.

The works of the Lord are great: sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.

His work is worthy to be praised and had in honour: and his righteousness endureth for ever.

The merciful and gracious Lord hath so done his marvellous works: that they ought to be had in remembrance.

### **Verses 5-9: Describes the deeds of the Lord**

The psalmist now outlines the works and wonderful deeds of God: 'Verity' (truth) and Judgement. He gives 'meat' - a reference perhaps to the giving of the manna and quail in the Wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11). 'Heritage of the heathen' (or in other translations 'the inheritance of the nations') suggests God giving the Promised Land to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 6-7). The final lines about 'redemption' and 'covenant' neatly summarise the actions of God in the Exodus and wanderings in the wilderness that delivered (redeemed) His chosen people, who subsequently have a secure and eternal foundation, legitimised by God for all time.

He hath given **meat** unto them that fear him: he shall ever be mindful of his covenant.

He hath shewed his people the power of his works: that he may give them the heritage of the heathen.

The works of his hands are verity and judgement: all his commandments are true.

They stand fast for ever and ever: and are done in truth and equity.

He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever; holy and reverend is his Name.

### **Finally, Verse 10: Introduces Wisdom**

With God described as '**reverend and holy**' in verse 9 (or as others have translated, 'awesome') the proper response of the worshiper in this final verse is to faithfully '**fear the Lord**'.

In the twenty-first century we tend to associate 'fear' with something scary, something we want to get away from, or something we think will harm us. Yet we read in the Old Testament that 'the fear of the Lord **is the beginning of wisdom.**' We are asked to appreciate that 'fear of the Lord' is actually a good and therefore positive aspect of our faith.

### **How can 'fear of the Lord' ever be a good thing?**

The Hebrew word for 'fear' (Yara) is powerful in meaning, and it has more to do with feelings of awesomeness or reverence. It describes being in the presence of the holy 'other' with cautious reverence rather than the sweaty-palmed, shaking, gasping-for-breath, negative kind of fear we often experience. Yara then, appears in the Hebrew Bible as a synonym for 'love'. Deuteronomy often uses 'cling to' and 'serve'. At its

root, the word 'fear' denotes obedience to the divine will. Consequently, on reflection, the psalmist offers a collective signpost pointing encouragingly to God's enduring love and care for us, however we may choose to define ourselves.

Approach this psalm then, as you might approach a window – looking faithfully through it to see what God's purposes might be for you and our present generation.

Rooted in the ancient events of salvation, the New Testament picks up this spiritual baton and relays it to the people of 2021 through our risen Lord Jesus, the Christ. As the modern 'people of God' faithfully attempt to recite (pray) and reverence (fear/love) the many marvellous deeds and acts of our Creator God performed on our behalf, we preserve and effectively re-state our important inheritance – namely our common mission to truly be 'the people of God' in all respects. The question is: *how* must we, as stewards in the present generation, express Gospel 'verity' (truth) authentically?

In summary, firstly by acknowledging our joint and sacred heritage, then faithfully passing on these stories, and finally acting with integrity (righteousness) to discharge our enormous individual and collective responsibility that comes with this heritage, at every opportunity, and to the very best of our ability.

*'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen!'*

Fr. Mike (Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021)