

Searched by the Psalms

**Psalm 149 & Luke 19:1-10
(Hymns – 421, 422, 399, 428)
October 31, 2010**

Sing to the Lord a New Song

This morning I'm going to do something unusual.
I'm going to preach against this Psalm.
I'm going to outline for you why I think this Psalm is wrong,
at least the last half of the Psalm,
from verses 4-9.

That's the part of the Psalm that prays for the defeat of other nations
and the punishment of other peoples.
It's the part of the Psalm that links the praise of God
with the punishment and destruction of an enemy.
It's the part of the Psalm that seems to assume
that if there is a winner, then there must be a loser,
and the loser deserves to be destroyed.

My reason for preaching against this part of the Psalm
is that I don't think it is consistent
with the dominant themes in the Scriptures,
especially those themes that are picked up and modeled
in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

There is an old tradition in Presbyterianism
that insists that we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture,
so preaching against these verses in the Psalm
is not being unfaithful to Jesus Christ,
but rather making clear the central message of the Scriptures
as they witness to what God was doing for us in Jesus Christ.

These verses set nation against nation
and peoples against peoples.
They celebrate victory through sharp swords
and revenge on the opposing kings, leaders, and nations.
They ignore the covenant to be a blessing to all peoples.
They ignore the prophetic call to beat swords into ploughshares.
They ignore the teaching of Jesus to forgive and turn the other cheek.
They ignore the witness of the apostles, especially Paul,
to welcome all peoples into the fellowship of the friends of Jesus Christ,
the community of the new humanity which is the church,
where there is not Jew or Greek, male or female, foreigner or native.

This Psalm expresses sentiments that leave the world babbling around Babel rather than reconciled through the mutual understanding of Pentecost.

I can understand how human beings would hold these attitudes
and celebrate these behaviours
after having defeated vicious enemies.

But I cannot agree with the sentiment expressed in these verses
that God takes pleasure in this kind of militaristic triumphalism.
It is simply not consistent with worshiping a God whose throne is a cross!

And as we approach Remembrance Day,
I can say honestly that I have not had serious pastoral conversations
with any veterans of this past century's numerous wars
who celebrated their sacrifices and victories in this spirit.
Their remembrance was sober,
filled with regret and sorrow,
hopeful that such horrific actions would never have to be taken again.

Yet we are surrounded these days by the rattling of swords
and the fervour of punishing revenge.
The enemies who embody pure evil have new names and faces,
but the attitudes driving the behaviours are as old as this Psalm.
Get rid of them, trample and imprison them,
and celebrate the victory as God's will.

My late friend and colleague at Vancouver School of Theology,
David Lochhead, wrote a wonderful book on inter-faith dialogue
entitled *The Dialogical Imperative*.
In it, he outlined an interesting overview of the history of the relations
between peoples of different belief systems.

Initially, they were simply ignorant of each other.
They did not know the *other* existed.
Their version of reality was the only version, the absolutely true version.

When these peoples began to encounter each other
through migrations and expansions of territory,
they became hostile to the *other*.
They fought for their way of seeing things,
for their power over the *other*.
This is the world of Psalm 149.
Not only were peoples and nations at war,
but gods were at war,
taking sides and guaranteeing victory
that always came with punishing defeat.

In recent times, a new spirit entered international relationships,
a spirit that many called partnership.
But David's analysis of this set of attitudes and behaviours was interesting.
He pointed out that usually the partnership
was between a strong partner and a weak one.
There may be peace, but the cost of peace was often exploitation of the weak
partner.
And that inequity often led back into hostilities
as the oppressed sought to achieve fairness and justice.

For David, the desired state of affairs,
one that actually did emerge from time to time,
was one of genuine dialogue
in which each people respected the *other* enough to truly listen and appreciate.
Through such conversations, mutual understanding and support
emerged in fair and just ways.
Past wrongs were forgiven.
Hope generated a vision of a different future.
People intentionally cultivated new attitudes and new behaviours
that supported peace, well-being, and blessing
among and between all nations.
They were pioneers of the new humanity
seen first and still most clearly in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Remember the text for the first sermon preached by Jesus according to Luke:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to set free the oppressed
and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people.*

That passage is from the prophet Isaiah, recorded in chapter 61:1-2.
Later in that chapter, Isaiah continues to proclaim what God wants:

*I love justice and I hate oppression and crime.
I will faithfully reward my people
and make an eternal covenant with them.
They will be famous among the nations;
Everyone who sees them will know
that they are a people whom I have blessed. (8-9)*

And earlier in the book of Isaiah,

the vision that early Christians were convinced foretold of the coming of Christ:

*A child is born to us.
And he will be our ruler.
He will be called, "Wonderful Wise Counsellor,"
"Mighty God," "Eternal Father," "Prince of Peace."
His royal power will continue to grow;
his kingdom will always be at peace.
He will rule as King David's successor,
basing his power on right and justice, from now until the end of time.
(Isaiah 9:6-7)*

This is the God that I come to Brentwood to worship Sunday after Sunday.
This is the God in whose service I expend my energy and talents.
This is the God's whose reign of well-being and peace
lies at the centre of all my hopes and dreams.
This is the God who places new songs upon my lips
and has me dancing throughout the week
with joyful thanksgiving for all his grace and mercy.

The world in its current state is not an easy place
in which to worship and bear witness to such a God.
But that is what we are called to,
as clearly and courageously as we can through the power of the Spirit.
For it is only in that kind of worship and witness
that we experience the full depths of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

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