

The Scope of God's Blessing

Ps.103 & Luke 13:10-17
(Hymns – 633, 407, 626, 625)

Just what does it mean to be faithful?

That strikes me as a good question to ask
as we listen for God's Word in this morning's Scripture passage.

Psalm 103 is one of my favourites.
It's such a powerful witness to the fullness of faith
as we are called to understand and live it
within the family of Jesus Christ.
It bears witness to the depth of breadth of religious experience,
to the power of worship that is related to it,
and to Israel's pilgrimage with God over many centuries.
Old Testament scholar Arthur Weiser calls it
"one of the finest blossoms on the tree of biblical faith."

It is as full as witness to the nature of faithfulness for Christians
as I've found expressed in 351 words anywhere in the Scriptures.

Interestingly, it sets our faithfulness in the context of God's faithfulness.

We are invited, indeed encouraged, to be faithful
because God has been faithful.

Our obedience of faith is a glad response
to God's choice of faith in us and our potential
to be his agents in making the world flourish.

The Psalm begins
with one of the most powerful hymns to personal piety in the Bible.

It assures us that we are not alone,
but part of a people called, equipped, and sent by God
to be His agents in the world.

And it reminds us that the whole universe is God's creation
and the focus of God's caring salvation.

This Gospel we are called to live and to which we are privileged to witness
is personal, social, and universal.

You can't have one without the other
and still claim to be a Bible-believing Christian.

[read vss. 1-5]

Faith is a response of gratitude for God's faith in us,
God's blessing of us,
made full and guaranteed in God's salvation in Christ.
As Calvin tried to say in so many ways,
don't worry about your salvation!
It is assured in Christ.

Turn your attention to glorifying and enjoying the God of your salvation,
to expressing the fullness of faith that comes as the gift of God's salvation.

In these first five verses of Psalm 103,
every fear and aspiration that humans can imagine are dealt with.
We are forgiven, healed, and redeemed.
We are crowned, satisfied, and renewed.
We are given steadfast love, mercy, goodness and youthfulness,
all with the majestic ease and strength of the eagle,
an image those of us on the west coast
can especially appreciate.

Three years ago, Jill and I went up to Desolation Sound
with Jill's cousin, Ruth, and her husband, Ron.
In one of the anchorages,
we had eight eagles circling over the boat,
almost as if they were watching over us and blessing our visit.

I still remember that experience.
The trip, short as it was, did renew our strength and sense of youthful energy.

Now, there are those who will argue that this deep personal piety
is what the Christian faith is all about.
This is what it has to offer.
It will save you from the adversities and dangers of life in this world
in ways that deal with all your fears and anxieties.
That is true and its appeal is powerful,
but the Psalm doesn't stop here.
There is more to Christian faith than personal salvation.
If we are to be true to the testimony of the Bible,
we cannot let the fullness of faith be confined by our own personal interests,
important as they are.

The most influential theologian
in the history of modern Canadian Presbyterianism
is a fellow by the name of Walter Bryden.
John Vissers, who many of you know
and who is currently the Principal of The Presbyterian College in Montreal,
has written a wonderful book about Bryden and his influence.

Bryden once said that the greatest human sin is reductionism.
We want to reduce God to manageable dimensions,
reduce God to fit our own needs and desires,
reduce God to fit our own image,
rather than conforming ourselves to the mind of Christ
and the image of God we find in his life and witness.

It's a powerful caution as we continue to examine the fullness of faith.

As I said, the psalm does not stop at personal salvation.
It goes on to review the purpose of God
and the history of the people or community that God chose
to further that purpose.

[read vss. 6-18]

Personally, we are part of something bigger than ourselves,
greater than us,
something that stretches back to Moses and beyond,
a community that witnesses to and works with
God's ways of blessing this universe.

Into the powerful sense of confidence provided in the first 6 verses
is introduced a sobering note of humility in these verses.

While this is a blessing to YOU,
it is not all about you.

It is about God and His purpose
and the people he has loved, redeemed, and called to work with Him,
to keep covenant and commandments.

And remember Jesus summary of the covenant and the commandments –
love God with all your heart, and mind, and strength, and soul,
love your neighbours,
and love yourself.

This is the covenant and these are the commandments
that will nourish us to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

We live with God not in some splendid isolation,
but in the hustle and bustle of a community with a purpose,
a people with a calling, a church in the world.

Now, again, for some this is what Christianity is all about,
a protected community especially cared for by God
where we can escape the dangers of this world.

It is a garrison of faith in a hostile land.

We make forays into enemy territory to rescue others,
but for the most part we huddle together for mutual support and comfort.

Faith is confined to this community of believers, to the redeemed of the Lord.

And that is a comforting view of the fullness of faith.
Sure, we have to deal with other people,
but, for the most part, they are pretty much like us.
And we have the advantage of being united in Christ against the world,
true believers banded together in defense of the faith.

But again, if this is our dominant picture of the fullness of faith,
we risk the danger of reductionism
because the witness of Scripture does not stop here.

It goes on to talk about God's dominion over the entire universe.
If we are to be faithful to God's fullness of concern and sovereignty,
then we cannot take comfort in our personal salvation alone,
and we cannot huddle together in our common faith alone,
but we must minister to God's will in all places of his dominion,
that is, throughout the universe that God has made.

[read vss.19-22]

This is the final witness to the fullness of faith.
There is nothing in this universe
outside the blessing and benefits of God.
This is the ultimate purpose of our personal and social salvation –
to do God's bidding as best suits our gifts throughout the whole created universe.

The fullness of this faith cannot be reduced to fit our comfort zones,
if we are to remain Bible-believing Christians.
As we open ourselves to be fed by God's Word and Sacraments,
we are lovingly invited out of our contentment,
challenged to grow in our appreciation of the fullness of faith,
and called to serve God's will throughout his creation.

From the blessing that God has bestowed in the very heart of our being,
in the deepest part of our souls,
to the blessing that God has bestowed upon the whole universe in Christ,
we are called to be part of that blessing,
part of the body of Christ inviting, growing, and serving
everything God has created for his glory and enjoyment.

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