

14 JULY 2024

## REFLECTION

### LOVE THE PSALMS

Readings: Psalm 24; Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6: 14 -29.

Each of our readings this morning is a rich source of spiritual nourishment.

Perhaps not so much the gruesome story of the beheading of John the Baptist, which may leave us thinking of the people who have been persecuted or executed for speaking the truth to power.

Our reading from Ephesians 1:3-14 is a great summary of our 'salvation status'. We are not redeemed by our own goodness, but by God's action of reaching out to us in Christ.

*<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ\* before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.*

But today, I want to focus mainly on the Psalm, Psalm 24 as a source of spiritual enrichment and nourishment.

I love the Psalms. It's been said many times, that the glory of the psalms is that they often speak to our deepest human emotions. 'Deep calling to deep' as the saying goes.

I often find the Psalms a great comfort, especially last thing at night, when I don't want to engage in other parts of the scriptures. Like the story of John the Baptist's beheading, and other gruesome events described in the Scriptures.

The Psalms are the Prayer Book and the Hymn Book of the Jewish people.

Psalm 24 is one of those grand psalms associated with high temple worship. It fits into the genre of Psalms of Ascent.

It was recited, or sung, as the worshippers and the accompanying musicians, made their ascent up the ramps and up the steps leading to the temple in Jerusalem.

In the first stanza of the psalm (vss 1&2) ownership of the whole earth and all creation, is ascribed to God. God is declared to be the owner and author of all creation. Simple verses which are meant to create a feeling of awe.

<sup>1</sup> *The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;*

<sup>2</sup> *for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*

The second stanza, (vss 3-6) offers a description of who is worthy to make the ascent into the holy of holies. Only those with clean hands and pure hearts. People who believe in the truth and who do not make false promises.

The third stanza (vss 7-10) addresses the entrance to the Temple. The gates and doors of the temple. And the place of worship.

<sup>7</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

I'm not sure what the practice has been in St Columba's in the distant past, but many Presbyterian churches used to use the sung version of Psalm 24 as their communion anthem.

I haven't used the hymn today, because it requires some practice to sing the various parts of the psalm. But it is a moving and inspiring Psalm - when sung well.

The anthem version of Psalm 24 was sung, as the communion elements (the bread and wine) were processed up the aisles, usually from the foyer (by the Elders) to the communion table.

In one of my past parishes, this was how they did communion. The communion table was set, as the anthem was sung.

The tops of the pews were also draped with white cloth symbolizing an extension of the communion table. Or perhaps the grave clothes left behind in the empty tomb.

The church looked magnificent, as the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza of psalm 24 was sung with gusto.

*'Lift up your heads O ye gates,  
and be lifted up ye everlasting doors,  
And the King of Glory shall come in!'*

The singing of the last verse of the Psalm coincided with the communion table being fully prepared and the elements all laid out neatly, ready to be blessed and served.

Communion was a high point in the church's life. And was celebrated every three months, so that it did not become too 'common', or 'run of the mill'.

I know that the Anglicans and Catholics see it very differently, and celebrate communion daily, or weekly as the case may be.

I don't want to emphasize our differences too sharply. We have more in common than our differences. And we get along very well in Aotearoa NZ and in Havelock North.

But we do have some cultural differences. The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ came out of the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland.

When it arrived in Aotearoa it was known as the 'Kirk'. It had a definite Scottish flavour about it.

Alan Davidson in his 'Christianity In Aotearoa', 2004 records the attitude of one of the Presbyterian Church's leading ministers, Thomas Burns of Dunedin.

*'Burns attempted to impose a stern Scottish morality on Otago Society. Sunday was rigidly observed and the first anniversary in 1849 set down as a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer, with two services. In contrast the 'Little Enemy' as the Anglicans were called, celebrated with two days of festivities, including aquatic sports, horse racing and a ball.*

The following year, Burns did not attempt to repeat his dour way of observing the anniversary.

I think I would've joined the Anglicans too. Much more fun!

While Burns and others tried to establish Otago as a Presbyterian Theocracy – the secular world was encroaching on Otago in the form of the Otago Gold Rush which brought thousands of people, of all cultures and religions, and no religion, to Otago.

According to Davidson, despite the influx of other migrants, Presbyterians still made up 50 % of the population, south of the Waitaki River. What became The Synod of Otago & Southland.

Burns was still very proud of the church attendances in Dunedin, which he reckoned were better than church attendances in his native Scotland.

What Burns and the Presbyterians also did do well, was to establish the first University in NZ in 1869, financed by Presbyterian endowments, with Burns as its first Chancellor.

I, and many other Otago graduates have benefitted from Burns' work, and that of the early Scottish Presbyterians.

Today's service has a definite Scottish flavour, as we come to our annual 'Kirking of the Tartans' service.

It is not a 'Lets pick on the English' service, but is a reminder of Scottish church history, when, as a result of war, the Scots were denied parts of their own culture, including their language and clan tartans. Things which made them who they were.

It's a time to celebrate the fact that these are things of the past. A time to want for others what we want for ourselves. The freedom to worship as we are, in our own way, without fear and without oppression.

To God be the glory.

## PRAYER

<sup>1</sup>The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;

<sup>2</sup>for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

We thank you O God,

That you are our maker

And that we are all made in your image.

Enable us to see your image

In everyone, especially in those

Who are not like us.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.