

Sunday Scribblings No.20 – 9th after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Psalm 85:8-13. 1 Kings 19:9-18. Matthew 14:22-33. Romans 10:5-15

The theme for today's Scribblings is "silence and salvation".

***** Psalm 85:8-13 *****

There are three Korah's in the bible and no precise way of knowing which is attached to this psalm despite the psalm's superscription of 'The Sons of Korah'. That said, it seems likely that these 'Sons' may be the sons of Korah that is recorded in Numbers 16 and that the first half of the psalm is referring back to an earlier time in the Israelites' history, whilst the latter half of the psalm is bemoaning their current position after release from captivity in Babylon.

You might remember that Korah and 250 others attempted (in Num.16) to overthrow Moses before a hole in the ground appeared and swallowed them up. They had gone against the word of God.

If that's the case, then the trajectory of this psalm makes perfect sense especially as the 'textual content' scholars place this psalm in the post-exilic period when they would be lamenting their past mistakes and years of captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. Hence, perhaps, the reference in v8 "**but let them not turn to folly**", a period when the Israelites had yet again ignored the word of God.

You will notice in the first two strophes that the psalmist is laying out their position before God in much the same way as most lament psalms are constructed. "But the first strophe and the second strophe seem contradictory. The first says that God has withdrawn his anger, forgiven his people, and restored their fortune. The second laments that God's anger goes on and on and asks that God turn from wrath to restore his people."²

Matters are further complicated in v8, when the psalmist suddenly changes from 'we' to 'I'. Consider this; what if the psalmist was using a piece of history to 'frame' the Israelites' current position in the first two strophes, and now, recently released from captivity in Babylon, is chanting, or praying on behalf of the people for their future?

Group lament and praise was common practice, not only in Israel but also in many other religions and countries as many believed, and still believe, that it had a 'multiplying' effect on the heartstrings of God.

Senior Professor Marvin Tate writes; "The positive statements in vv 10–14 are made up of traditional material, but they are artistically constructed into a brilliant and unique passage, which reminds the reader of Deutero-Isaiah. Moses Bottenwieser, 273–80, even argues that Ps 85 is from the same author as Isaiah 40–55, though earlier. He notes the striking similarity of Ps. 85 to Isa. 40–55 but says there is no "labored imitation"; the psalm shows the "poetic spontaneity" which marks the works of genius."³

Wow! Amazing! Is it possible that Moses Bottenwieser is correct and this psalm was indeed written by the same author as that of Isaiah 40-55. If that's the case, no wonder it is complex and beautiful.

Little wonder then that he changed the pronoun from 'we' to 'I'.

***** 1 Kings 19:9-18 *****

(To get the full story, you really need to read *all* of this chapter.)

Did you notice the similarities between Elijah and Moses?

- Both were prophets.
- Elijah travelled for 40 days and nights and lost faith; Moses travelled for forty years and kept faith.
- Elijah went into a cave on Mt Sinai, whilst Moses has stood in “the crevice of a rock”.
- Elijah “covered his face with his cloak”, whilst God covered Moses face.
- Elijah killed four hundred and fifty of Ahab’s prophets; Moses commended Phineas on killing two Baal worshippers.
- Moses kept God’s commandments and yet did not see the Promised Land.
- Elijah lived in the Promised Land, but could not keep God’s commands.

Elijah’s prophetic career reached it’s climax on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18), but reaches the end of the road in Ch.19 on Mt. Sinai when God ends his career as a prophet and recruits Elisha in his place.

So what went wrong for Elijah after such a successful Mt. Carmel experience? I’m not sure anyone can answer this with complete clarity but here are some points that may resonate with us in our current predicament.

- Elijah was given a job to do by God.
- Instead of staying with his people who have just reaffirmed their faith by proclaiming, “**The Lord – He is God. The Lord – He is God**” (18.39), he killed the 450 Baal prophets and then blames his current predicament on the Israelites and Jezebel.
- It’s debatable as to whether these killings were part of God’s master plan or not.
- He deserted his post and ran to the mountains for safety.

When God asked him; ⁹“**What are you doing here, Elijah?**”, implying why are you not ‘there’, Elijah tells God half the story. He omits the 450 deaths he was responsible for; he fails to tell God that he is hiding from Jezebel and he fails to tell God that he needs His help. Instead, he blames the Israelites.

God asks him again; ¹³“**What are you doing here, Elijah?**”, but Elijah’s answers remain elusive and the same. The die is cast and sadly for Elijah, this is the beginning of the end of his career as a prophet for God. Nevertheless, God gives him one last job – to go back and anoint various people as per God’s instructions ... but yet again he fails, and the baton is handed to Elisha.

I can’t help but notice similarities in this story to our own times. It is tempting for those of us under pressure to run for cover; to destroy those nearest to us; to call on God but only admit those failings we wish to confront; to fail to be totally honest in our daily Godly dealings.

And just as God was not in the ¹¹“**powerful wind that tore the mountains apart**”, or in the ¹¹“**earthquake**”, or ¹²“**in the fire**”, He may not be in the negative, self indulgent noise of our everyday living chaos.

But He is in the ¹²“**gentle whisper**” that comes to you in prayerful silence. The type of silence that Jesus experienced whenever He went up the mountain to pray. The type of silence that He sought out when He “withdrew” to a quiet place.

I've always been intrigued by this miraculous account of Jesus 'at work'. Many preachers seem to focus on Peter's attempt to walk on water ... only to find out that he was human and that his mustard seed of faith was not enough to enable him to properly emulate the Son of God. Should we congratulate Peter for his efforts, or castigate him for his folly? What do you think?

Let's take a closer look at the text and marvel at what is a truly amazing miracle where Jesus does what only God can do. Make no mistake, this is theophany in action. (A visible manifestation to humankind of God.)

You will remember from last weeks reading that Jesus had to confront the issue of John the Baptist's beheading and then feed the 5,000. Not surprising then to read in v22; "**Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.**

Why the urgency? Why the apparent desperate need to be alone?

The answer awaits us in the next paragraph; ²³" **After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.**" As was so often the case, Jesus seeks out the silence of a mountain to commune with God.

Now, sit quietly, and take a few moments to think about that verse.

Jesus, part of the Trinity and appointed Son of God needs to take time out to commune with God in silence. Ask yourself, what is it that 'silence' brings to the party? Why does He pray in this way? And if this is what Jesus is teaching us to do, why do we not do it?

- Maybe it is because to do the work of God we must have our spiritual batteries fully charged?
- Maybe it is because doing the true work of God is more challenging than we can possibly imagine?
- Maybe it is because this is what God has designed us to do.
- Maybe it is because we have yet to learn 'How to pray'.

So, if His Son has to 'stop' and be 'refreshed' through prayer, why on earth would we think that we can pray properly as we run for the bus, peel the potatoes or listen to some hastily scribbled meaningless words we can hardly hear in a cold church service? And of course we cannot.

That said, many of us can, and do, use these kind of 'arrow prayers', or 'emergency prayers', as we go through the day. But how many of us find and use the silence of a mountain (even if it's a metaphorical one) to really connect with God and download our share of His spirit for the next leg of our earthly journey? At first, the silence can be daunting. Noisy. Busy. Embarrassing. Even just plain difficult. But the secret is that once you learn to master the silence and find out how to 'plug into God' your batteries will be recharged; your mind will be cleared; your brain will be de-fragged.

Now Jesus may not have had a laptop to worry about, but **He knew how to connect with God.** He knew that He needed to recharge that small voice of God that is resident in all our hearts. He knew that we needed to be taught by example and He knew that words were not enough; and although I'm quite sure we will not master the art of walking on water, we should take heart by learning from the Master of miracles that everything starts and ends with deep silent prayer.

I encourage you to spend some time and think about these two miracles. Not about the loaves and fishes or Peter trying to walk on water, but on what God wants each and every one of us to learn from these two extraordinary events.

³³ **Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.**

***** **Romans 10: 5-15** *****

Before we take a brief look at this reading may I suggest you read the end of Romans (9:30-33) entitled “**Israels Unbelief**”. Then I’d like you to look at Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16. Notice how the prophets words have come to pass. Uncanny ... or God’s planning?

This week Paul continues on his journey, stressing and wrestling for those Jews who believe in the ‘old Israel’, rather than Christ and the ‘new Israel’.

He makes his concerns quite clear in v1; “ **Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved**” and qualifies his statement with this; ⁴” **Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.**”

Clearly, it’s not anti Semitic, anti Pharisee (he used to be one), anti Samaritan, anti Sadducee or anti anyone for that matter. It is merely a statement as to how he sees the way forwards for ALL people *after* his eyes and heart had been opened by Jesus (God) on the road to Damascus. As he makes clear in v12; “**For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.**”

In vv5-8 Paul quotes many verses from the OT telling us to mind our own P’s and Q’s. It is not our business to worry about who will be saved and who will not. (Take note Elijah). He continues; ⁹ **If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** ¹⁰ **For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.**”

Think about that for a moment. Salvation is that simple.

Note the two stages; believe with your heart and profess with your mouth.

Question: Does this mean you cannot be a closet Christian? If so, what about being a Christian in, for example, North Korea where the penalty for believing is death?

“Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harbouring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment and execution.”⁴

Paul continues; ¹⁴ **How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”**

Which may go some way towards helping us understand why we need to go to church.

Why we all need to hear the word of God if we are to believe.

Why we all need to learn from Jesus.

Amen

To finish, a short prayer from ***Saint Patrick*** (c389-c461)

Lord Jesus, hear my prayer.

“Our God, God of all men,
God of heaven and earth, seas and rivers,
God of sun and moon, of all the stars,
God of high mountain and lowly valleys,
God over heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven.

He has a dwelling in heaven and earth and sea
and in all things that are in them.
He inspires all things, he quickens all things.
He is over all things, he supports all things.

He makes the light of the sun shine,
He surrounds the moon and the stars,
He has made wells in the arid earth,
Placed dry islands in the sea.

He has a son co-eternal with himself ...
And the Holy Spirit breathes in them;
Not separate are the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit.”⁵

In the name of Christ.

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.
2. Mays, J. L. (1994). *Psalms* (p. 276). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
3. Tate, M. E. (1998). *Psalms 51–100* (Vol. 20, pp. 370–371). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.
4. www.persecution.org/2020/07/20/north-koreas-secret-christians/
5. The SPCK Book of Christian prayer. 2009. SPCK. p.29.