

John Docherty, July 26, 2015

Psalm 107 : Thanksgiving – Give thanks to the Lord ... for he satisfies the thirsty

The psalms.

They're a collection of songs; of hymns; of prayers; of poetry.

They've long been a source of inspiration, comfort, and blessing for Christians throughout the centuries. In fact, they're so highly regarded, that in some traditions the only hymns that would be sung in church would be taken from the Psalter.

In some ways, they've been seen to embody our most intimate conversations with God. As we've seen over the last few weeks, some are expressions of desire; some are songs of praise; some are prayers of confession; some are hymns of lament; some are calls for justice; and some, like today's, are poems of thanksgiving.

They all have a poetic feel to them. But Hebrew poetry is not quite like poetry in English. In traditional English poetic style, we expect poems to have a particular metre, and a particular rhyming pattern.

The theme of today is thanksgiving,
With prayers and poems and singing.
But it's really quite plain,
That the poet's insane,
And he'd rather be out Highland-flinging.

Hebrew poetry, as I said, is not quite like this. One of the sources I used in preparing for this meditation had this to say about Hebrew poetry:

“Hebrew has been regarded as by far the most suitable of all human languages for the expression of noble poetic sentiments, due in part to the manner in which words were accented.”

... A sentence written by someone obviously imperfectly familiar with the gentle cadences of the lofty limerick.

While many translations attempt to impose our poetic stylings on the Psalms, it remains that the poetic form in Hebrew relies on parallel messages; repeated injunctions; the drawing of metaphorical images.

In the psalm we read today, Psalm 107, we have a really good example of this kind of poetic structure.

The psalm begins with a quite familiar declaration of God's faithfulness and love : O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!

The poem then continues with the four parallel passages that illustrate this truth about God's love, and then ends with a final image of God watering a dry and desolate land.

If you were listening carefully to the readings, you'll have noticed that the parallel passages all follow the same pattern : they describe a particular group who are suffering :

⁴ Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
⁵ hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

¹⁰ Some sat in darkness and in gloom,
prisoners in misery and in irons,
¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.
¹² Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour;
they fell down, with no one to help.

¹⁷ Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
²⁴ they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

²⁶ They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
²⁷ they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.

they then cry out to God for mercy or relief;

God delivers them from their distress
God saves them from their distress
God brings them out from their distress

And they are then encouraged to "...thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind ..."

What I particularly like about the way the psalm is structured is that God isn't always intervening to help the faithful. God isn't rewarding good behaviour with merciful acts of deliverance. There is no tit for tat payment of mutual obligations.

In at least two of the examples, the people concerned in this psalm are in a position of having turned their backs on God, and God's act of salvation is offered in spite of the fact that they have done wrong.

I like this image of a God who is willing to reach out and help those in distress, even when it's not explicit that they have recognized their mistakes – they are just in distress, and crying out for help. There is compassion at work here, and we are joint beneficiaries of this compassion.

I like some of this description of sin as behaviour that brings on its own consequences; an image of people who are architects of their own distress as they turn their backs on God and mistreat those around them.

To quote the psalm :

³⁹ When they are diminished and brought low
through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,
⁴⁰ he pours contempt on princes
and makes them wander in trackless wastes;
⁴¹ but he raises up the needy out of distress,
and makes their families like flocks.

And yet, as I was writing these last few lines, I realized that I was experiencing a decidedly smug attitude, because the needy were being raised up out of distress, and the princes were being heaped with contempt and being made to wander in trackless wastes.

Where is the compassion for the poor princes?

If God is willing to reach out and help for the simple reason that one is in distress and asking for help, then where is the compassion for the poor princes?

My dad used to like telling the story of watching an interview on the BBC of former British Labour Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson. The conversation turned around questions of tenants' rights, and the interviewer at one point asked Wilson "... but what about the poor landlord? ..."

To which Wilson immediately responded "... there's no such thing as a poor landlord ..."

Where is the compassion for the poor princes? ... a very large part of me wants to respond : there's no such thing as a poor prince – they're getting exactly what they deserve.

But I think that answer misses the point of the psalm. I suppose there is no compassion here for the poor princes, because the princes don't recognize their poverty of spirit – their meanness of heart, and they aren't asking for compassion.

Everyone else knows they are in trouble and they turn to God for help.

And God is more than happy to help.

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.