

Praise to the God of power and life

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

All Saints Day—6 November 2016

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Psalm 149, Ephesians 1.11-23, Luke 6.20-31

Introduction

Human beings seem to be good at developing societies that have two basic principles in their formation and governance: first, they privilege the wealthy and, secondly, conflict requires that one show strength through retaliation. These two principles then exert a gravitational pull on our ideas like status or power or authority and leadership. They drag irresistibly other great ideas like justice or peace or neighbourliness or praise into the black hole that these two principles create.

Sometimes our heroes are poor or non-violent. It does happen as in Mandela or Ghandi or St Francis or Mother Teresa. But it is rare enough to be remarkable.

All Saints Day locates us in another universe.

Who is the saint?

Saints are often depicted as so extraordinary that we could never identify with them. The story seems to be that their faith never wavers, their virtue is clear and transparent, their trust in the loving nature of God's will unshakable, and their unselfish service to others is unremitting. They seem to be people capable of extraordinary feats of courage and self-denial.

So it all seems a bit gloomy for the rest of us. And it is if we take this moralistic road in our spiritual journey. It is a blind alley. Not that we shouldn't have unshakable faith or offer unselfish service to others. That may be a necessary part of being a saint but it is not sufficient to express it that way. For it leaves out the crucial ingredient: the blessing of God. The Psalm expresses it this way: "The Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory (4).

The Lord is the Maker or Creator of the community and its king. Here is the picture of the creator of a work of art taking great pleasure in what she has produced. It now has a beauty all of its own. We are God's making as a people and God admires the beauty of God's work. This is the foundation of the Gospel. It is the root cause of the story of scripture. Paul in Ephesians puts it another way.

The story has progressed from the time of the psalmist and now it is God's love bestowed on us in the crucified and risen Jesus. The Holy spirit seats that love and pledges the future to us. we are a people born out of love and given the birthright of hope. Between those two poles we find our freedom, our true humanity. Between those two poles we find status as inheritors with the risen one and we find true power in God setting life free.

Saints praise

So saints praise. They praise their Maker, their King, their risen Lord and inheritance giver. And no wonder.

The psalmist grieved over the loss of everything while he sat in Babylon and later in Judah as a serf to the Persians, Greeks and Romans. Many of his colleagues had lost the will to sing and the desire to live the life of the kingdom. They felt abandoned, deserted. They were a mocked minority. The gods of the Babylonians and all their imperial overlords had displayed

their aggressive might and wealth and won. Here they were a defeated and depressed people, tacking hope.

And yet they praise.

The disciples in Ephesus have placed themselves on the fringes of Roman society by becoming disciples of a disreputable Semitic religion, belonging to a heresy of the heresy that was Judaism. Yet here they are talking about inheritance, power, life and freedom. They speak of another ruler far above Caesar, to whom they owe first allegiance. They walk and talk another language another story, another set of pictures.

And they praise.

And Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “Blessed are you who are poor (20)! Blessed are you when people hate you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man”, (22).

You can bet the earliest readers of Luke identified with these words. And yet their response is, “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven” (23).

Worship is counter-intuitive. It is a statement against the grain. It is the future being made present and the future transforming the present. That is why the Psalms go on incessantly about praise. Praise is the language that enables us to transform the present into the future.

Saints act

And that is why saints act. Praise does not numb the brain and the heart but enlivens them. Praise is the muse that stirs the imagination to think out of the square. Praise gives us the language to think and act beyond ourselves.

Now perhaps we might understand the second part of Ps. 149. “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and a two-edged sword in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations ...” (6-7).

Now these words send shudders down our spines. They sound like a call to holy war to bring about the future kingdom now. I left these words in deliberately so we can confront them. They have been used for the call to war. The Maccabees used these words. Caspar Scloppius inflamed Roman Catholic princes to the Thirty Years War using them. Thomas Muntzer kindled the flame of the peasants’ revolt in Germany during the Reformation with these words. So these words come to us with an ambivalent and provocative history. How will we use them?

It is important to ask the question because it is all too easy to mistake or misconstrue the world in which we exercise faith and hope. It is not benign. The ancients were well aware that the nations and their rulers were not neutral when it came to the kingdom and its values. The values of the privileging of the wealthy and the show of strength confused with power through retaliation are the very reverse of the kingdom.

The words of Ps 149 are the words of the powerless and oppressed sitting in Babylon in despair. They have no way of ever fulfilling such military sentiments, or any intention of so doing. They live in a world where regular legal processes to restore justice, right relations and to overthrow the yoke of oppression have proved incompetent, failed or were not even on the radar. God’s role for the nation or state to provide justice for all is ignored.

In that instance God alone can reverse the situation.

Think of what Jesus says in the Gospel. He repudiates the privileging of wealth and the retaliation by humans that spawns violence. In fact, he introduces us to a way of thinking at

odds with the values that drive our world. The welcome news he brings is to the poor. God rules on their behalf. Now. The hungry and the reviled are where God is at home.

On the other hand, God is at war with the privileging of wealth and violence, derision and the exploitation of undeserved status. But His way of conducting warfare on the world is to reverse everything. Loving enemies, offering cheeks, shirts and coats are all ridiculous responses to violent acts. Or are they?

There is a big difference between saying “resist evil with all your might and do not react violently” and saying “just walk all over me, I’m not anything important”. Jesus makes ordinary people moral actors who can change the world by changing their own responses. And he makes them imaginative moral actors.

He demands from his followers imaginative and assertive non-violent responses to bring justice to the bitter problems of our day. Jesus wants us to undermine aggressively violence and hostility. What was it Ghandi said? “Everyone knows that Jesus teaches non-violence except the Christians.” Too many years of supporting violent wars has eroded the credibility of the Western church.

Jesus is saying to us, “Do not let the opponent dictate the terms of your opposition to him”. That is what the psalmist says. But Jesus goes beyond the imagination of the psalmist and says break the spiral of violence and do not let it get a grip on you and drag you into its vortex. He wants us aggressively and imaginatively to undermine the structures of status and power that deride the poor and derisively laugh at the mourning and grieving.

Perhaps we can understand the central part the cross plays. That is where God’s great reversal of justice and peace takes place. At the moment of their greatest triumph violence and injustice exhaust themselves in the resurrection. That is how God is ruling on the behalf of the poor. And the saints who inherit God’s blessing and who praise and rejoice in God then act to fulfill God’s rule of justice and peace. But they do so from the creative vision of the God of the cross and resurrection.

Conclusion

We need to make Paul’s prayer our own. We rejoice in the gift and power of God but we long for discernment, wisdom and enlightenment to turn that rejoicing into action, action that will bring praise and honour to the kingdom. We need to make Paul’s prayer our own so can find the imagination and the courage to undermine hostility and violence. And our praise must reflect that struggle with the values of society and politics that set themselves on foundations of privileging wealth and violent retribution.

Then we join that great crowd of witnesses.