

Refuges and Foundations

Chris Cheah

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Genesis 6: 9-22; 7:24; Psalm 46; Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-28; Matthew 7: 15-29

From today, our liturgical life in one sense starts to settle down. Since last December we've already experienced 5 out of our 6 liturgical seasons for the year. These were: the anticipation of Jesus' coming during the four weeks of Advent, his birth during the 12 days of Christmas, his becoming revealed during 5 weeks of Epiphany, the preparation for his Passion during the 40 days of Lent, and the experience of his resurrection during the 50 days of Easter. These all culminated in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and our reflection (with Ian Marshall) on Trinity Sunday last week on the fullness of our triune God.

From today, we have the quieter 6 months of year of so-called 'ordinary' Sundays until Advent comes around again in December. But as 'ordinary' as these Sundays may be called, they are, in some way, the point of the whole exercise. As Rob pointed out to me when we were canvassing my preaching today the theme of this Season after Pentecost is 'Life with God' or 'Life in the Spirit'. The idea, I suppose, is that with the coming of the Holy Spirit we are now called on to live in and by the abundance that the Spirit brings and to figure out what that means in practice.

It turns out that today's readings are actually quite a good place to start off our new Season, in part because of the range and variety of themes and ideas they contain.

But there is, I think, a dominant image that comes through in all of the readings, and this one is particularly useful as launching pad for reflecting on what 'life in the Spirit' means in practice. That image is the idea of refuge.

Psalm 46, of course, has those powerful opening words: "God is our refuge and our strength and a very present help in times of trouble". In the Old Testament story of the flood, God instructs Noah how to build an ark specifically as a refuge for himself, his family, and for the animals against the flood waters of chaos that were to be let loose. In the Gospel reading, Jesus talked about the simple good sense of building on good foundations, again before the storm comes. And even St Paul's idea that we are 'justified' by our faith is, in one sense, a kind of doctrine about ultimate refuge. It's in part the idea that because of the Cross, we are no longer under the judgement of the law, and we can go to Christ whenever we feel the weight of judgement upon us.

Now, for me, the really interesting thing is that although these readings all have an idea of a sanctuary or refuge or safe place behind them — which is a comforting kind of idea — they all sort of have an edge to them as well. In all of them there is the idea of building, foundations, and preparation. And in doing this, three of the readings stress the fact that change is inevitable. Storms come.

This reminded me of a story I recently heard a fellow tell about how, when he was at school many years earlier, he and some mates had been set the topic of whether religion was more about comfort or about challenge. (It's hard to imagine that topic being set these days, but that's another talk!)

It's not only a good debating topic, but a real question when thinking about 'Life in the Spirit'. Do you see your religion as being more about comfort or challenge? Actually, I think most of us on reflection would answer that it is both, albeit with a different emphasis depending on the circumstances. Both ideas relate to refuge.

Perhaps the most obvious tack in these modern times would be to regard religion as being mainly about comfort. It's true, when things go badly wrong, religious people do have a bigger place to go to. We have inner resources, a hope for the future, and a God we can take strength from. There is nothing wrong with this, and sometimes it will be appropriate to focus almost exclusively on the comfort side of things. When someone has just had a disaster happen to them, it's probably not the time to start lecturing them about divine judgement! J

But there can be risks in overdoing the comfort thing. For one thing, there is the risk that if we just stress the 'feel good' bits — 'Jesus is our friend', 'lying down in green pastures', and that sort of thing — then when things happen that don't fit the model the comfort we might be looking for might seem a bit shallow. In fact, in these post-modern times, it has become fashionable among quite a few non-religious people I have come across to be rather dismissive of the whole God thing as being a comforting fantasy. While I don't agree with them (and in fact think that this kind of fatuous thinking just shows how little contact with real religion they have had) there is at least the germ of truth there. There is a risk that an overly comfort-based religion can degenerate into sentimentality, triviality, or (perversely) maybe even creating an idol that is largely a projection of our own wishes and fears.

Jesus ended his Sermon on the Mount (which in Matthew goes on for three chapters) with these rather sobering words in today's Gospel: "Everyone then who hears my words and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain fell, the floods came and the wind blew, but it did not fall because it was built on a rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand...". Hmmm. There is a message in there about comfort and refuge. But it's a refuge that comes from having built on good foundations, and hence there is a challenge too.

It's worth teasing out these wonderful metaphors a bit. Surely a lot of our lives can be seen as a kind of building project. Our childhoods were maybe bedrooms 1 and 2. The rumpus room was our adolescence. There was the 'relationships kitchen' over there. And later came the 'education and skills sun room', the 'attractive and healthy body image coat of paint', the 'job and career extension', and maybe some kids rooms (perhaps in the basement J). And so on. Our life (or at least mine!) can be thought of as a kind higgledy-piggledy building project that has been constructed out of where, over a long period, we invested our time, energy and effort. We may not always have been able to choose the materials we got to work with, but we did generally have some choices about the design parameters and what we were willing to work on.

And in fact, although we might not admit it, or even be aware of it, many of our house building projects were probably motivated in part by a desire to create refuges — little safe places — along the way of life, in part because we were scared of the alternatives. Alternatives like loneliness, sickness, meaninglessness, poverty and so on. But whatever our motivations, we tended to keep on building more rooms or at least trying to making the current rooms prettier.

Now, the problem is that is that all those worldly things that make up our houses are, as all our readings today suggest, subject to change. The Tsunami that hit out of the blue last Boxing Day is a dramatic and quite literal example of what the gospel reading was talking about. But perhaps more prosaically, when we unexpectedly find out we have cancer, or one of our kids dies, or our reputation is damaged by a career scandal, or our skills are impaired by an injury (or Alzheimer's!), we may suddenly find the whole house that is who we think we are creaking and swaying. And of course old age and death will eventually catch up with us all. Storms will come. And if the foundations on which our house are built are not very good, this kind of shock can be enough to bring the whole thing down around our ears.

Yes, we can and should go to God for refuge when this happens. And yes, he probably will be a help in times of trouble in some way that is linked to our capacity to receive that help. But if we haven't built good foundations, the going will still be tough.

Fortunately, we have been given guidance on how to build good foundations for the houses that are our lives. Jesus said, act on my instructions on how to build a good house (or, if you prefer a different image, a good ark). The instructions for good foundations are all there in the Sermon on the Mount and include:

- Shifting the centre of gravity of my life to God
- Learning how to pray properly and making sure I do this regularly
- Learning how to give, and forgive, and how to make peace
- Learning how to withhold passing judgement, or measuring others, while at the same time learning how to listen with a discerning ear to the inner truth of a situation
- Learning how to control my speech
- Learning how to love my neighbour, and even my enemies — which in part means making provision for them in my ark design too
- Learning how properly to love myself — not in any kind of narcissistic way — but rather by learning the art of humility, or how to see myself as I truly am, and taking pity
- Learning the art of being faithful
- Learning the art of how to let go of all things that are not permanent — in other words everything except God; and
- Learning how to go to, and drink from, the inner spring that gives the water of life. The river, whose streams, as Psalm 46 said, make glad the city of God.

These might all be summed up by saying: by learning the art of walking with humility and righteousness in faith with the Holy Spirit. And if we can do this we will become the kind of trees that Jesus was saying cannot help but bear good fruit. And as an added bonus, our houses will never fall even if the winds of life blow and the floods come because they have become houses of faith.

It is worth, at this point, maybe making a few observations about that word 'righteousness'. This also pops up in most of today's readings and is a word which is unfortunately at risk of being relegated into being religious jargon. In common speech it has, like some other related words like 'holiness', taken on some unfortunate overtones. My impression is that many people hear it as something a rather strict and grey — of something that belongs to a disappeared world of traditional methodist headmistresses. Reliable and solid and 'worthy' maybe, but also somewhat wowsery, a bit severe, a bit boring, and just maybe tainted with in the context of 'self-righteousness' — which, in fact, an unhealthy focus on one's own righteousness can all too easily become.

But the decline of this word righteousness is sad, because in its original form it's a rather lovely idea for which there isn't a ready substitute. 'Righteousness' to me should convey the idea of a way of being in which one loves good things for their own sake — not because not because some rule or commandment says that one has to, and not because of fear that if I don't obey this or that rule I will be punished. And certainly not because I want to look like a methodist headmistress!

Righteousness in the sense of walking with the Spirit comes when we actively seek out a sense of what the right course of action is in a particular situation simply because that is what we have come to take delight in, and we can do no other. Because doing the right thing is what resonates with who and what we are and who and what God is. And then, of course, it becomes a source of deepest joy.

In his letter to the Galatians, St Paul spoke about the fruits of the Spirit not as a new impossible list of additional legal things we now have to do to earn God's pleasure or avoid his wrath, but rather as a simple summary of the kinds of things that someone who loves righteousness will naturally exhibit, and will always honour and delight in. St Paul's list of 9 was love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This helps us understand what Jesus was talking about when he talked about the good fruits of the good tree.

It's with this kind of perspective, I think, that we need to listen to the words with which our reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans started with. These were: "I am not ashamed of the gospel... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith: as it is written 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

So, our religion is in fact a place one goes to for refuge in the sense of both comfort and challenge, and it really is about foundations and getting the basis of our life right.

But we can take this idea of refuge deeper still. In what ways can we look upon God, our great Trinity, as a refuge?

Well, one way might be to do a Christian form of the Buddhists' 3 refuges. For me this would be to recite reflectively, as a prayer, the following:

I go for refuge to God the Father

I go for refuge to God the Son

I go for refuge to God the Holy Spirit

In saying "I go for refuge to God the Father" I take shelter in the idea that I come out of, and am created in the image of, an unknowable and transcendent truth. It is actually possible to take refuge in the idea that I am but a passing wave on an ocean that it is broader and deeper and vaster and more boundless than anything I can possibly conceive. While that thought is also scary, it is also reassuring in the sense that anything that comes along in the external world is sort of immediately put into perspective. Yes, I might die, or, as Psalm 46 puts it, "the world should change", yet I shall not fear.

In saying "I go for refuge to God the Son" I take refuge in the fact that there is also a humanly-scaled dimension to the help God provides. In Jesus, I have a guide, a teacher, a healer, someone who has walked the path before me, as well as someone who was willing to die for me. Someone who showed the truth of what it means to be a wave on that great ocean of the Father and who could choose with equanimity to pass away with it under shocking circumstances, and in so doing be reborn transformed as the first fruit of the Spirit. A refuge because he gives us the way, the truth and the life. A refuge in whom we can grow as branches in his vine, who gives us daily food, who gives us the confidence to go on. A refuge who embodies both the personal and transcendent and who is loved by the Father as his Son.

In saying "I go for refuge to God the Holy Spirit" I embrace change itself as a kind of refuge. The bright wind of heaven is always blowing and is calling me home. Rather than fearing change, coming to the Holy Spirit as a refuge means learning in the depths of the heart that change is written into the nature of creation, and it is glorious. For by taking refuge in the Holy Spirit comes the realisation a way of being that is relational, energised, yet totally free.

As a final thought for today on how to go for refuge to God, we might also note that beautiful line towards the end of Psalm 46 where, seemingly unconnected with the tumult that preceded it, it suddenly says “Be still and know that I am God.” Maybe that is how, at the end of the day, we truly come to take final refuge in the great mystery of existence that we call God.

So, on that note let’s finish by listening again to most of Psalm 46 and its mystical Hebrew thoughts about what life in the Spirit means:

God is our refuge and strength and a very present help in trouble
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change
Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns...
He utters his voice, the earth melts.
Come, behold the works of the Lord,
Be still and know that I am God, I am exalted among the nations
The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.