

PSALM 127 REBUILD US

We are now at the middle of the collection, and this eighth psalm of the Song of Ascents introduces us to a more upbeat section of this collection. In this section the people's enemies are seldom in view, receding into the background. This psalm introduces the possibility of happiness (5).

The Psalm continues to emphasise the importance of trusting in God and living in dependence on God.

What threaten the people are their own priorities (127.1-2; sinfulness (130.3), and pride (131.1). So Psalm 127 is a little turning point in the collection. Notice too that it has a unique attribution of the psalm to Solomon.

Unless the Lord builds the house (1-2)

The first image here is building a house. Which house? It could be any kind of a house, a normal everyday run of the mill house. Or, by extension in the Bible, the Temple, a place to meet God in worship and praise. Or it can refer by extension to having children. Hidden in this phraseology is the idea that a house can be a dynasty (1Sam. 2.35; 2Sam 7.27), a priestly or a royal dynasty that will provide leadership to the people of God.

And the point of the image is that without dependence on God the activity is vain-worthless, purposeless, and meaningless.

The second image is that of guarding a city, a common human activity again. In the Bible the reference to the city is richly ambiguous. It might be Jerusalem; it could be any city or town. Guarding is about security. As we go about our business or sleep at night we worry about security. Think how important an issue it is in our world.

Guarding is a characteristic activity of God (Pss. 25.20; 34.20; 86.2; 97.10; 116.6; 121.3-5, 7-8). Without God's presence human guarding is of no avail. Security belongs to God. Now of course this is an article of faith.

The third image is that of excessive work arising from and leading to needless anxiety. This is another common modern activity. While 2d is not completely clear (NRSV) the meaning is: God provides what humans need without their excessive striving. Grace is the key. This verse is a counterpoint to Gen. 3.17-19 in that it promises provision beyond what humans can produce for themselves. It is a reversal of the Fall.

Resting secure in the God whose covenant love surrounds and desires our peace allows us to sleep in peace.

Unless the Lord builds the family (3-5)

Think about how domestic this psalm is. Securing a home, establishing a safe neighbourhood, working for a living, and having children.

All of these activities can be approached in terms of human effort and accomplishment. However the psalmist insists that they should be viewed in relation to God, and in the case of children they are to be seen as God's gift.

In the context of the Exile these children are the future, they represent strength to rebuild and security against the inevitable enemies that may assault the family or the nation.

The fact that this Psalm is attributed to Solomon is very interesting. The great builder of Israel spent more time on his own house than building the Temple (13 v. 7). He had many children but many to pagan wives and that became a problem for Israel's worship and

commitment to the one God. He secured the kingdom but with methods such as forced labour, royal violence, forced taxes. The result was the destruction of the united kingdom. He is a wonderful negative example of the values of this psalm.

Without God everything we do in our ordinary domestic lives is fleeting and empty.

To be content (5, see Ps 112.1) is to be settled and at peace. It is linked to being blessed. This is the wonderful news of God's promise of presence in our mundane domestic lives that creates contentment or peace.

Further reflection

Ordinary realities of life are of extraordinary significance. God cares about the mundane matters of real estate, community, work and family.

But the Psalm challenges the everyday secular understanding of these realities. On the one hand, the normal routines of life are not just irritants to be tolerated and, on the other, they are not the be-all and end-all of human existence.

Having a nice house maybe part of the Oz dream but it needs more to make it a home. Having a crime free neighbourhood does little good if all we live for is hoarded goods. Making a living is a proper activity but it means little if we do not know what it is that makes work and life worthwhile.

Our desire to assist the hungry and dispossessed in our community, our care and encouragement of seniors or our advocating for refugees need deep grounding in God's love and mercy.

These are good things but they can become 'demonic' when they express self-sufficiency, autonomy, self-centredness rather than dependence on God (Ps.1). They become destructive when they become a means of expressing self-centredness rather than hospitality, pursuing greed rather than generosity.

The Psalm invites us to entrust our lives to God and not be so anxious about them, to pursue God's claim on us as a first priority and embody that as God's will (Matt. 6.25-34). This is the way to find contentedness.

Of course what applies to the domestic applies also the corporate lives as the people of God. Unless the Lord builds the church, those who build it labour in vain. We belong to an age of pragmatism in methods of church growth, the temptation of which is to think that we have made it ourselves.

We are prone to the temptation to take personal credit for God's work among us. It is Adam and Eve all over again.

Question

The poet suggests that without trust in God's agenda for us a house is built uselessly, a city is watched over uselessly and it is useless to rise early, work late and worry endlessly. Share your reflections on that.

What does contentment mean for you? How can we practise contentment in our lives? How might our own priorities militate against our contentment?