

## Psalm 68 – God’s power and justice (1<sup>st</sup> June 2014)

*ALMIGHTY God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sound familiar? Anyone recognise where that’s from? (Confession BCP Communion – said an hour ago)

Why start with that? Important point (good place to start): society has changed since this was originally written in 1540s, and way we relate to God has changed with it. Bible same, key aspects of worship same – still sing, pray, read bible, take communion, confess – but things we choose to emphasise about God and about us have changed in emphasis. Compare this confession with ones we use now:

Today’s one probably most meaty of modern confessions – full range of types of sin included, as well as full confession. Missing key components: ‘judge’, sin ‘against thy Divine majesty’, which therefore provokes ‘most justly thy wrath and indignation against us’.

Most modern confessions a lot briefer. Placement in 2009 at church in Bristol – confession which didn’t include word sorry or any actual repentance in it – ‘world’s not very nice, wish it was a bit nicer’ that kind of thing. We lit a candle and looked very thoughtful – but I found myself wondering what God made of it. (Felt like giving us an excuse not to say sorry?)

Brings us to today. Look at how we deal with difficult bits of psalms, especially the stuff to do with what the psalmists wish upon their enemies. But I think we have to acknowledge that part of the challenge is less with what the psalmists say than with the way we think about God and about ourselves today.

At the risk of sounding cheeky, I’m not sure a lot of us like God being God anymore. We like the stuff about him being close to us, and comforting us and giving us peace and guiding us through life. And that’s half the story, isn’t it? But the idea that he is still king of the universe, that if we wrong other people we also wrong him personally, that he has every right to judge us and others, and to end the world whenever he wants. We don’t like that quite so much, do we? In the hierarchical, monarchical society of 16<sup>th</sup> century England, God’s Divine Majesty was taken for granted. In anti-authoritarian, self-obsessed 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, the idea of a great big God who, you know, actually *does* stuff like judge the wicked etc is kind of off the agenda.

So let's have a look at Psalm 68. Long, and very comprehensive. And **lots of great stuff about God**, each of which could be a sermon:

- Praise (like last week) – READ v3, more in v4 – glory of his name (READ v4)
- How God upholds the vulnerable: READ v5-6a, and then more in v10
- Guards and blesses his people – READ v7 – he protects and saves his people (like week 1) – READ v19-20

It's all there. But right at heart of it is **stuff we don't like so much**:

- READ v1-2 – God scatters his enemies and judges the wicked
- In case not sure first time: READ v21-23
- Also withholds blessing on earth as well: READ v6b

**What do we do with this stuff?** Lots of it in OT, and especially in the psalms. How do we treat it?

- Marcion – 2<sup>nd</sup> century – throw whole OT out (led to formation of canon!)
- Or do we just ignore it? - e.g. Psalm 139 EXPAND – v19-22 – like discordant orchestra in 'A day in the life'

Tackle this today – puts a lot of people off the OT, need to get right perspective

## **Let God be God**

Recognise influence of our culture in this. Enlightenment (pick up from last week), consumerism (Lent: power of personal choice). God gets made in our image an awful lot of the time.

*We read the bible through tinted lenses.* What is dominant word used to describe God in the NT? Probably say: Love (agape) – but actually word 'Holy' used as many times in NT as word love. E.g. Revelation (another book we are scared of) is final word – emphasis on God's holiness & justice.

So we come to these Psalms which are quite clear on God's majesty and power and struggle to accept it. We want a small, close God rather than a big, majestic God. But God is God. He is our Father but he is also in heaven (Lord's Prayer captures that beautifully). Is our God big enough?

This in turn affects how we then see stuff like God crushing his enemies.

Helpful context – polytheist culture of ancient Israel – lots of gods – whose got the biggest God?

There is real evil in the world. Canaanite culture used to sacrifice its own children to their gods. And we mustn't forget that God is just and he can't just ignore wickedness – that would be fundamentally unjust.

e.g. of stoning this week – another child sacrificed. Global outrage – what would people say if police/judges in Lahore say 'it's OK. It's for honour of family, we'll let them off.' Or bigger scale – report on North Korea: chaired by Australian judge Michael Kirby: After more than three decades as a judge, "I thought I was impervious to tears", but evidence so horrific... Guardian article:

*‘Following a year-long inquiry, the UN inquiry concluded in February that the North Korean government had committed grave crimes against humanity without “parallel in the contemporary world”. These crimes against humanity entail extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation.’”*

Justice demands punishment. We have this inbuilt sense of justice – part of bearing image of God. God must judge the wicked or he is not just and therefore he is not God.

Caveat – we are all wicked. What people object to is perceived self-righteousness of psalmists when NT insists that all have sinned and fallen short of glory of God. Likewise that God desires to forgive all people through Jesus. Leads to next point:

### **Progressive revelation**

Posh theological term for idea that God has revealed himself and his truth bit by bit to world. First in creation and humanity’s basic hunger for God. Then to his people through law and his interactions with them and people around them, then through Jesus and subsequent Spirit poured out on all his followers. So our understanding is more complete than with David 3,000 years ago. So we do have to be careful with some stuff in OT.

- Offer of forgiveness and grace available to all people
- ‘Love your enemies’

But also remember Carolyn Sanderson’s idea – astonishing that people 3,000 years ago with few written records could have such a relationship with God and such insight into his character.

Also true that God will judge wicked, and that rebellion against God does starve us of blessings. Just that God has intervened in Jesus to offer us a way out. Adds extra dimension of humility to way we read the psalm.

### **Displacement**

What of vengeful side in text? – e.g. Ps 137:6 – heads of Babylonian children against rocks

Sometimes it’s our lack of context – new research ‘Babylonian children’ refers to army – so not innocents, but soldiers. Which is why we still need good scholarship, which honours the bible but can explain things we might not be able to.

More important – raises question of what to do with our anger at evil – who will act? Return to stoning: blogs go into usual debate about whether using drones any better, which prompted one blogger to say: ‘Can we drone the guys who beat their pregnant relative to death with bricks? Because I’d pull the trigger.’

Some of you may feel the same, but *this is precisely why we need the psalms*. If you read the psalms, you’ll notice that it is God who is implored by the psalmist to act in judgement.

The importance of this is that people don't take matters into their own hands. They trust God, who is perfectly just, and able to judge rightly. E.g. of our family – when Amelie or Isaac get mad with each other we say – 'first, try and sort it out peacefully yourselves; but if not, come to us and we'll intervene. Don't lash out in your anger.' That's exactly what is going on here: Israel is not lashing out, she is taking it to God and letting him decide what to do. You see, there is a value in this, it's been much misunderstood, especially by modern readers.

Interestingly, it is exactly the same as NT view: Romans 12:19 'Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath.' Let God be God, let him decide. This is idea of 'displacement.'

The problem with much of our human anger is that we don't hand it over to God, we assume that we have the right to act in vengeance. Now when this is properly administered via due process of justice then that is fine. But more often than not, it isn't. That's why I believe there is more value in using these psalms than we often admit. Whatever we are feeling in our hearts, we give it back to God, who alone will act rightly in all circumstances.

Brings us back to where we started 5 weeks ago. The psalms allow us to talk openly with God. To share our hopes and fears, our anger and praise, our sadness and joy. In all of it, God is placed right at the centre, just like he is here in Psalm 68: start v1 'May God arise... end v35 Praise be to God' The psalms allow us to be honest to ourselves and with God, and in doing so to involve God intimately in all of our lives. These songs and prayers become our prayers, the story of our walk with our loving Creator. We shed masks of piety for faces of exuberant praise, sorrowful lament or determined intercession.

And this honesty flows from the sort of secure relationship which genuinely believes, as David says, that God is a 'father to the fatherless.' He is a true father, we can share everything with him, and we can do so knowing he is a God of power and justice. All-loving, all-wise, all-powerful. This is the God we worship. And the psalms give us words to do it. Have we made our God too small?