

Trinity Sunday 2017 - Tarago

A sermon by Tom Frame (11/06/17)

We all have favourite Bible passages to which we turn in times of thanksgiving or in moments of trouble ... and we all have Psalms that speak to us in a particular way (perhaps almost in a personal sense), usually to encourage and inspire or to console and comfort. For instance, we might bring to mind Psalm 46: 'God is our strength and refuge, a very present help in time of trouble ... Be still and know that I am God' or perhaps Psalm 121: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills: but where shall I find help? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth'. The Psalm set down for Trinity Sunday, Psalm 33, does not come to mind for many people and yet it is a special Psalm. Why so?

Because it is one of only four Psalms that lacks a title! The others are Psalm 1, 2, and 10. All the other Psalms have some sort of title. Many commentators believe that this Psalm is linked to Psalm 32 – perhaps its second part – and that it was separated from 32 so the Psalm could number an even 150. Notably, in Psalm 32, King David praises the Lord for forgiving his sins. Psalm 32 closes with a command to rejoice, verse 11. Psalm 33 opens with the very same command.

While these two Psalms are very different in their content (even though they might once have been combined), they are both centered on the theme of praise (which is what we come here to do – together). In Psalm 32, God is to be praised for forgiving human sin and removing individual guilt. In Psalm 33, God is to be praised for creating a world of infinite wonder and for imparting order to its operation. Both themes make God worthy to be praised. But then we come to verses 10 to 12. They are a strongly discordant note: the Lord frustrates the counsels of the nations, brings to nothing the devices of the peoples while the counsels of God shall endure and the purposes of God's heart will abide. This section of the Psalm concludes with the words (in verse 12): Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people God has chosen as an inheritance. Who is that nation?

There have been plenty of nations over the centuries claiming to possess the kind of heavenly favour that grants them a divine mandate. This is a serious claim. After all, if God has chosen such a nation, surely it has a destiny that we oppose at our peril. Let me mention a couple of contenders. In 1862, in a message to the United States Congress, Abraham Lincoln called the Northern Union (the anti-slavery part of the United States), 'the last best hope of earth [which] God must forever bless'. US Presidents from John F Kennedy to Barak Obama have spoken of the United States as a 'shining city upon a hill', echoing a sermon preached in 1930 by the Puritan John Winthrop who was quoting Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 5 verse 14. It remains an assertion of American greatness.

In 1902, when the British Empire was most extensive, Arthur Benson, an English poet and son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a hymn to imperial power which he set to the famous tune composed by Edward Elgar, *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1*:

*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?
Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.*

These words of this song were often associated with Psalm 33:12, 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord'. Britain was said to be *that* nation and Australia, as the first Dominion, reflected its glory. In popular artwork of the time, the words of the psalm were frequently superimposed upon an image of the Union Jack or the reigning monarch. Note the power of music to communicate an idea and the instruction in verse 2 of Psalm 33 to use the finest of instruments in the praise of God. There is a certain pretension here that we cannot ignore.

Germany, Japan, India and Russia have all claimed a special status in human history. And although only German assertions of superiority were associated with the Christian God, the notion that one nation is exceptional and exempt from the conventions that bind all the rest has been a recurrent theme in world affairs for centuries. So what do we make of such claims on this Queen's Birthday long weekend given the coronation of the British Monarch – our head of state – is not unlike the consecration of a Christian bishop?

Let me stress this has nothing to do with monarchism or republicanism because neither is a concern of the Biblical writers or, in my view, of pressing interest to God. The Bible would seem to suggest that there is no such thing as a 'Christian nation' as we might imagine a Christian *nation*. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a nation that has shown complete obedience to the commandments of God nor reflected the will of God in its collective life. Although the ancient nation of Israel was nation set apart to be a blessing to all peoples, it had failed to bring peace or prosperity to those within its own borders let alone its neighbours. So it is not without reason that the Psalmist writes: 'Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break their bonds in pieces, and cast away their cords from us" (Psalm 2:1-3).

This is not to say that nations have not been guided or led by men and women who have submitted themselves to the sovereignty of God or humbled themselves before the majesty of God. There is a painting hanging in the National Portrait Gallery in London depicting Queen Victoria presenting a Bible to an ambassador from East Africa in the audience chamber at Windsor Castle. The title of the painting is 'The Secret of England's Greatness'. There is an assertion here that Britain became *Great* Britain because of the influence of the Scriptures and Christianity. The converse assertion is that Britain became a shadow of her former self, morally as well as politically, when the nation rejected the influence of Holy Scripture. In our recent history we had a prime minister who openly professed his Christian convictions in Kevin Rudd but his own party deposed him and the Australian people rejected him.

I can't accept claims that nations are especially blessed for all sorts of reasons, mostly because I am not persuaded that there are blessed nations. How, then, could the psalmist write, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people God has chosen as an inheritance"? Who or where is this nation? Who has the Lord chosen as an inheritance?

In Biblical times the nation was not determined by lines drawn on a map that reflected the boundaries of political or legal or social power. Our experience of the nation cannot be projected back on ancient times. Then, nations were usually considered to be groups of people who shared a language or a religion or a shared history. This is why the writer of the second letter attributed to Saint Peter could write to his friends:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy... sojourners and pilgrims... (1 Peter 2:9-11)

The people of God are, therefore, those who constitute the 'blessed nation' – a nation that is bound not by lines on a map but by a disposition of the heart. We hear an echo of this notion in Ephesians 1:18 where the Apostle Paul declares his desire that every believer may have 'the eyes of your understanding ... enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of Christ's inheritance in the saints'.

In the original language, the words "in the saints" are used in a locative form. That is, those words tell us the sphere in which Christ's inheritance is located. Linguistically, the phrase "in the saints" defines the word 'inheritance'. Therefore, the saints of God, purchased by Christ through the embrace of his death, are His inheritance. This takes us back to Ephesians 1:11, where Paul says that: 'in Christ also we have obtained an inheritance'. A more accurate translation of the Greek would be that "in Christ we have been allotted as an inheritance." As Psalm 33:12 puts it, believers are "the people God has chosen as an inheritance'.

We can take two things away from this Psalm and this verse. The first is that the nation – the Australian nation – is not a subject for worship or even veneration. We might feel a bond with those who share the land but it is not a bond of abiding significance. It is temporary, you might even say passing. We have other affiliations and other loyalties ... our connection to the human race and our membership of the Christian community – these loyalties transcend the physicality of this world and survive our passing. In death we are defined as members of the human race and citizens of the Kingdom of God. This truth ought to temper our embrace of nationalism and our attitude to people of other nationalities. In these turbulent times, such a mindset matters greatly.

The second thing we can take away from Psalm 33:12 is the importance of the Christian community. We can be Christians in our individual daily lives and in the vocations to which God

has called us. But when we come together for worship and fellowship, we constitute the people of God and the blessed nation the writer of the Psalm had in mind.

I meet many people who downplay and even disparage the importance of joining together in a worshipping community, believing their faith is adequately expressed in isolation from other believers. But they are wrong and acting contrary to the guidance of Scripture. We come together for encouragement and solidarity ... and to reminded that God calls us together as a form of service in which the most needy is the most privileged.

The notion of a national church is terribly misguided. Why? Because nationality is secured through birth while church membership is acquired through baptism. I don't expect the nation to act in a manner consistent with the teaching of Christ or to support Christian teaching because it is not the church. But I expect the Church to reflect the life of Christ and to show what the world will be like when the promises of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount take concrete form. When people complain that Australia is slowly becoming a Muslim nation I am unmoved. First, because the number of Muslims remains so small and their political power and social influence so minor. And second, this was never a Christian nation but more a nation of Christians. I am not confident that more laws and tighter regulation of certain sections of the community is the right answer but I can't think of too many instances in which the Christians striving to be more Christian is not the best way to strengthen human society and to affirm the worth of every person.

There is much upon which we can and ought reflect in Psalm 33, most particularly our sense of nationhood but more importantly, our true citizenship. May God grant us the humility to be the nation of which the Psalm wrote and to be a blessing to all God's people. Amen.