

## Psalm 105

A sermon by Tom Frame (09/08/20)

There is so much to be negative about in this world at this time – isn't there? Most of us would say 'yes, there is'. The worst public health crisis in a century, the economy on a precipice, hard won export markets are now uncertain, people are indifferent to the wellbeing of others, China is asserting its presence in Asia and in globally through devious cyberwarfare, and the environment continues to groan under its misuse. Could things be worse?

A century ago in 1920, things might have been worse with so many men and animals killed in the Great War, the Spanish flu killing at least 8 people in Tarago and Lake Bathurst, the economy faltering and heading slowly towards the Great Depression of 1929, and tensions between nations eventually climaxing in a war that would leave 20 million dead.

It all depends on perspective, doesn't it? The longer you live the greater span of years are available to make a comparison. The events of 2020 have been unexpected and unsettling. But does that give us added reason to be negative or oblige us to take a more balanced view? This is the question posed in the today's Psalm – 105.

We recited the first 16 verses. The reason we recite the Psalms is the same reason they were recited 1500 years ago. We can all read but we read these verses aloud and together so that they might shape who are as a people. Hearing ourselves say things is often important – to externalise what is internal .... To allow the force and effect of the words influence our mood. We always attend to a message when it comes to us through multiple senses – and so it is with Scripture. Hence, the compilers of the Prayer Book insisted we see the words and we hear the words.

There are two parts to Psalm 105 (on page 332 of the Prayer Book). We recited the first parts which runs from verse 1 to verse 15. The second part of the Psalm is a brief history lesson. It recounts If you read these words with no context, you might be left asking why ... why should we give thanks to the Lord ... why should we speak to others of what God has done ... why should we exult in God's holy name? What is it, at least to the Psalmist, that prompts this invitation ... or, should I say instruction? There are three things: first, to explain; second, to remind; and third, to encourage. Let me say something about each of these reasons for reciting the Psalms.

The Psalms are a commentary on God, on us and on the world. It canvases God's motivations, our responses and what they mean for human society and

the physical universe. In the first instance, the Psalms explain that this is God's world, it bears the divine imprint and was made good – meaning all created beings existed in harmony and their needs were met. But at some point, human beings asserted their primacy, became self-centred and selfish, devalued the lives of others and deluded themselves into thinking their actions had no consequences or they should not be accountable for them. The outcomes was chaos and disorder in the form of violence and oppression, greed and indifference – things that damaged individuals and blighted the planet. And then God intervened to address wrongs, redeem evil, heal the broken, restore the damaged and demonstrate to human beings the things of which they are capable.

Most of the Psalms are explanations of human affairs – what has happened, why it occurred and how it ends. There are many overarching explanations for human affairs on offer. They tend to focus on power, money, gender, race and class. Each have a story to tell and they have varying degrees of explanatory power. But the most comprehensive account is a theological one. It stands back and apart from human affairs, encompassing God and the cosmos with a explanation of human origins and human destiny. We should reflect on scripture and always, and let me emphasise always, take the biggest possible view – to take God's view – when we look at specific events or particular people. We can lament something we see reported in the news and complain about individuals whose conduct affects each one of us – we can lament and complain – or we can reflect and explain. This is about the getting of wisdom, the gaining of insight – and it is more important than passing judgement and condemning others. The Psalm invite us to stand back ... to take the wider view – and to seek understanding. And when we truly understand, we give thanks, we sing God's praises, we exult the divine name.

The second motivation for reading and reciting the Psalm is reminder. As a very average academic who works with really clever people, I am impressed with what my colleagues can do (including sending small rockets into space) but I seldom see what could be called new knowledge. Most clever people take what they already knew and find new applications for their knowledge. While there might not be too much new knowledge, we are bombarded day and night with information – much of it opinion masquerading as information. It is hard to escape the constant messaging that comes at us via a range of media. What do I, what do we, really need to know in a world of trivia and spin where fake news and cunning propaganda are enveloping us. We can be distracted by the barrage of information and find ourselves distracted by false claims and dismayed by exaggerated fears.

This is where the Psalmist cuts through the noise and static with clear and concise reminders of God's character, God's purposes, God's promises and

God's goodness. We have all faced moments when we needed to be reminded of some fundamental truths. That our families love us and will not abandon us, that we have been given friends who will care for us and not turn away, that we have intrinsic worth because we have been formed in the image of God, and the spread of evil will not be able to resist the triumph of good. We need to hear very few things because the truths that undergird our lives are neither many nor complex. As we get older, I have found, we focus on fewer things and hold them more tightly. The Psalms are an integral part of our worship because we need reminders – things that we know but which need to come from the shadows into the light, from the fringes of our living into the centre. And when we are reminded of God's journey with us, during the highs and the lows, and the ups and the downs, we will, to quote the Psalmist "call to mind what wonders he has done" and know our lives and our selves are secure in the hand of the God who knows our name.

And the third motivation for reading the Psalms is encouragement. Many of us are easily discouraged. We often take to heart criticisms and put downs, or we see media coverage of the great and the good, the young and good looking, and may feel ourselves lesser beings or second grade human beings. So many things can deprive us of the courage we need to meet or overcome the challenges that life places before us. In other words, we are readily discouraged, living well within our capacities and never exploring our potential. The only time our performance is addressed is when we do not meet someone else's expectations; or the only time somehow comments on our personal qualities is to criticism them. As someone explained to me the other day, if you wanted applause you should have joined the circus. As a species, we treat each other with a callous disregard that is perhaps unsurpassed.

And then we hear the Psalmist and the words of encouragement that ooze from the text. God has done good things for us not because we are worthy but because we are loved. We are the subject of divine attention because we have inherent worth – we matter to God and our lives have a point and a purpose. We are invited to work with God in restoring the world's equilibrium and harmony one relationship at a time. We are given a share in bringing nearer the kingdom of God preached by Jesus – co-creators with God of a better future. We can make a difference when we are the best versions of ourselves – and God pledges to help us fulfil our potential. God isn't going about the work of God and occasionally thinking about us. We are the work of God and the focus of God' first and best efforts, as we see in the life of Jesus whose own needs were never placed before those of others, as we heard in the Gospel reading from St Matthew.

I began by asking whether we were justified in being negative. The Psalmist helps us to creep up on an answer. To focus on all the negatives leads to

incessant grumbling and a life of despair; to focus on the mercies of God leads to the hope of a new day and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. Natalie Sleeth expressed this sentiment beautifully in an anthem entitled, *Hymn of Promise*. It goes like this:

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;  
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

Here is explanation, reminder and encouragement. May these words lift your spirits and raise your sights in the coming week. Amen.