

Psalm 1

The book of psalms is tremendous! It begins with a great word – blessed! Happy! Great. Good news so far. And who is it, pray tell, that is blessed! And then suddenly it gets all negative! Someone who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.

Yesterday afternoon was a great sunny day in Ely. And, as usual, the words of this week's texts are rattling round in my head. So, I was in the park, playing with both my ancestors and descendents. My parents and my kids. And it was sunny, and happy, and everyone in the park was nice and family and middle class. And lo and behold, in the distance, three men appeared. Each sporting tattoos, all bare-chested, two of the three had shaven heads, each of them carrying a can of beer, one of them carrying a large box of beer cans to be consumed in the heat of the park, and they walked in such a way as to let us all know who was in charge of the park. And of course, they stopped where my kids were playing. Swore a bit. And then they sat down, in the middle of our makeshift cricket pitch.

I felt quite blessed. Blessed is the man, who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. And these three men seemed to fit the bill on all three counts. And they were swearing, and they were loud, and they were drinking – and I was not one of them. So – what could I do, but introduce my blessed self? I told them I was a professional religious extremist, and that this morning I would be preaching to a congregation in central London. And I told them what the text was – mentioned that they looked as though they were fine candidates for wicked, godless, sinners. And asked them what they would like me to say to you.

Now, as is often the case with these people – they look aggressive and scary and like they are about to hit you. And in reality, they were gentle, friendly and polite. And they asked me to tell you that they were not who you think they are (although, of course, I was able to tell them the same). Sure, their language was a little colourful. But then, so was Paul's and it didn't stop the church from making him a saint. Sure one of them was keen to tell me how hard he was, and about a fight he'd had in prison. But their basic point was that when people treat them as criminals, that is how they behave. And when people treat them as humans, that is how they behave. I'm sure there must be a whole sociological theory about that – but spending some time with these people destroyed the kind of sermon I might otherwise have preached.

And so, I watched how they behaved with the other people in the park – or if they were just being polite with me. And I watched them approach a young family near by and say to the father – “mate can we borrow your football – and your kid”. And they took this little boy off to the former cricket pitch, and played football with him. And within a few minutes, representatives – kids and adults – from around the park had been sucked into this game. And this bunch of utter misfits had created some form of genuine community!

So if this bunch of people were not the wicked, godless, mockers -who is? Naturally I scanned the park for other candidates. My eyes came to rest on my parents, bringing a swift end to that exercise.

But watching all these people moving and running and sitting and walking. In the first instance, it showed quite clearly, that the psalms are introduced not with an expectation to

believe the right things or assent to the right principles or live by the correct stereotypes. The psalms do not invite us to understand the world properly. The book of psalms is introduced with a fundamental physicality – focussing on the way we sit and walk and stand. It is one thing to believe the right stuff. And naturally nowadays, there is a lot of talk about applying the truths we find in the bible to our daily lives. But even for those of us who have been Christianly programmed to do this **stuff** – still, ironically, tragically, and all too often – our worship of God fails to penetrate the core of who we are – so that it works its way out in our sitting and walking and standing.

It is much easier to think – here is what the bible teaches, so here is what I need to do. Meaning – Application, and yet none of it touches me, none of it seeps into my bones, not of it has any substantive effect on my own-most personal identity.

The psalm continues by saying that the Blessed man, is the one who delights in the Torah, who meditates on the word of God day and night. That is not the same as reading it day and night. But allowing Scripture to seep right into the heart of your being – so that it becomes the primary lens through which you view the world.

Having recently been scanning Christian bookshops, the predominant approach to Christian living and Christian ethics and Christian discipleship still remains – here's what the bible teaches, so here's what you need to do. All of it at a safe distance, - the bible serving as a magical proof text that only goes to show that our Christian project, our way of being church, our worthy Christian goals are true – because look, we have a load of de-contextualised free-floating bible verses to back us up! The words may come from the bible, but they are not biblical.

The psalmist invites us not to quote bible – but to meditate on Scripture – so that when we encounter people, when do our shopping, when we go to church – we never consciously think ah – here's I should behave in a scriptural way. If we are a people who meditate on Scripture day and night, you never have to ask those kinds of questions.

I am convinced that if I had been able to bring the author of this psalm around a Christian bookshop with me, he would have concluded that many of the Christian paperbacks simply endorse the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners and the seat of mockers. Entering into the world of Scripture takes us somewhere else.

It takes us away from the desire to grab at fruit – away from the desire to achieve predetermined outcomes for our lives. Away from personal goal setting, and self-improvement, and economic growth. We are programmed by the culture in which we live to delight in these things, to aspire after them. My guess is that living by targets and goals and aims and objectives – is a symptom of a wider cultural assumption that human beings should expect economic growth. On and on and on and up and up and up. But this kind of goal setting does now infect our personal lives, not just our business lives. The fastest growing religion at present is that of self-help, and obsession with self-improvement.

And let's be clear – replacing a set of godless, selfish goals for our own personal future for which we must strive, with a set of biblical, virtuous, ethical goals – makes no difference. It might look better. But the godliest Christian goal setting still excludes God's presence from our present! The real time of God's blessing is postponed to some future that will never

arrive – because that is the nature of goal setting. They are like the chaff that the wind blows away.

The psalmist locates his delight not in some future that will never arrive – but day and night – here and now, day and night. And then he goes on, that the one who meditates on Scripture day and night is like a tree planted by streams of water – which yields its fruit in Season. Far more important than the whole goal setting mentality – worship God, and see what happens. Meditate on Scripture day and night – and see the fruit! A very different approach to determining your target fruit and then going for it. Be rooted and grounded in God, and just wait to see what fruit arrives!

Whatever he does, prospers. This is the biblical root of the so called prosperity Gospel – which says that God blesses you financially if you're a good person. I think the point is rather that if you meditate on Scripture day and night – then you might be the person who experiences a prosperity that others may not even see. Last week saw the funeral of a close friend of mine – Molly Misselbrook. She and her husband were members of my church in Somerset and were in ministry together for years. Lewis had spent his pre-Christian life reading self-improvement books, and became a Christian underwater in the second world war – after his fighter had been shot down by akak fire. Lewis had his masters degree from Oxford, he is one of – if not the – best communicator of the Christian gospel I have ever known. Now in his late 80s, members of the youth group where he lives are still calling upon him constantly to preach. Some of his bible study notes are available on our website.

And yet, he never owned a house, never had any money, never had any of the things we would associate with success. And yet, this couple radiated beauty everywhere. And to hear them speak, the things that brought them joy were simple, straightforward, people-centred things. Whatever they did prospered. And they were poor as church mice. And this was a couple who knew what it means to meditate on Scripture.

And this, we see in Christ himself. When he was not setting out to achieve all that a good Messiah should set out to achieve, John the Baptist sent a couple of messengers to ask whether he was the Messiah. And he did not reply with a good theological agenda for his mission – he just pointed behind him and said – look at all this stuff that's happening! Blind people see, lepers are cleansed, the poor receive the good news. Fruit appearing in Season.

And as we heard from the Gospel reading, Jesus prays that his followers will be sanctified. That his followers will be set apart. Not that they will behave like nice middle class people in a park on a sunny afternoon. What sets them apart is not some set of rules, or a set of goals or a set of principles. But a living commitment to the living God revealed in Scripture. Not set apart because they have Christian labels on their hopes and dreams and goals and habits. But set apart because at root, is a daily, habitual meditation on the Holy God revealed in Holy Scripture.

Set apart, not because they are trying to make the world a better place. Set apart because God is at work in their lives, yielding fruit in season. Sanctified in truth – not because they have the right information – but because truth in scripture means exposure. Truth is a two part word where our own most personal identity is up for grabs in our worship of a God who engages us personally. Much easier to worship so that God is recruited to endorse our good intentions and Christian goal setting and political hopes and quests for justice. Much easier to

do all those worthy things, than to worship God in truth – to be sanctified in the very roots of who we are so that it cannot help but affect even the way that we sit and walk and stand.