

## Confidence – Ps 27

Psalm 27 is attributed to King David, and when you look at the sheer level of confidence, you can see why. In fact, this idea of confide

David himself was hardly lacking in confidence when he went up against the giant, Goliath. Can you imagine the sheer extent of his self-belief. Every soldier in the army is terrified of the warrior facing them down. Now, even if an army is on your side, it is a frightening sight. And in a military environment, an environment that depends upon a strong top-down hierarchy – lowly soldiers are made well and truly to feel their place.

And into the midst of this group of hardened war veterans, scarred by years of battles with the Philistines, a shepherd boy pitches up, too small for any armour and untrained with any weapons – and he goes up before this unstoppable foe. How would you feel? You'd be able to hear the jiggle and clatter of war gear and yet carrying none of it for yourself.

Well, we know the story – David cheats, and pulls out his semi automatic 9mm Wulther PPK and shoots Goliath in the head. Not only that – but he then takes the giant's own sword and cuts off his head in front of the entire Philistine army.

That David, is the author of this psalm – and in this psalm you can hear that same utter confidence. King David, knowing that if he is in the temple, Israel will be secure, depending utterly – as they do – upon the goodness of God. The only problem, is that – the temple wasn't actually built until the following generation. So maybe we have here something of a prophecy of what the temple, which David had wanted to build, all that the temple might come to symbolise.

To dwell in the house of the Yahweh – to be a worshipper in the temple, speaks above all else, of intimate communion with God himself. And that, is the ground of David's confidence. Being set high upon a rock – yet more imagery of the temple, set on the rock of Mount Zion.

And having confidence in what you believe is a timely question given that we are now told it is acceptable in polite society, to ridicule Muslims. Some of you will have heard the debates, and heard the same old arguments trotted out by defensive Brits telling us it's ridiculous. Proclaiming angrily to the world that the Moslem community (if such a thing exists any more than the Christian community), that the Moslem community should put its own house in order before bleating about being unfairly treated. If you heard Radio 4 this morning, you will even have heard a professor trying to distinguish between rational Islamaphobia, and irrational Islamaphobia, as if one were acceptable and one were not!

But then, the whole question is hardly anything new! People have always ridiculed what they do not know. Since I've been a minister, I don't think I've belonged to a church where I haven't heard jokes told about other religions. The jokes don't always go down well – but what does it mean, for Christians to be secure in their own beliefs?

For some, being secure in Christian belief, absolutely means that we must ignore, ridicule, fear or reject any religion we do not know. What do we know for sure? We know that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Therefore, all other religions are wrong – and it is our right –

neigh, our duty, to oppose them. How else can we be confident of what we believe? In fact, it was within these four walls that I once heard a small group insisting that – when David beat Goliath, it was necessary for Israel to massacre the Philistines in order to stop non-Christian religion from spreading! And all this, was said at a meeting I was leading, which also contained two Moslem students! And I thought chairing a meeting about economics was difficult.

To be confident then, in what we believe, to rest our lives high on solid rock, to base our confidence on the God of Scripture – does this necessarily mean that we must stick our finger in our ears when we hear talk of other religions, lest they poison us with their demonic mind games and undermine our faith in Jesus Christ?

I suppose it depends what confidence is. For many, to be confident is simply to be outgoing – or extrovert – or self assured. And there is no end of self-help paperback assistance ready at hand for those who think the best way to become more self confident, is to try to become more self confident. The kind of schemes doomed to failure from the start, because they are so often based upon some individual mind games concerned with self-belief.

The whole point about confidence, it seems to me, is that it is first and foremost a relational quality. It concerns your readiness to confide, in another person. To be fully and truly yourself in the presence of another person. Nothing to do with being arrogant, or cock-sure, or professional. Everything to do with being fully human.

It seems ironic to me, that when we can be totally ourselves in the presence of another person, so that we receive ourselves back from another person affirmed or challenged – one of the bi-products long term, is likely to be the kind of “self-confidence” that so many people hanker after so desperately. You are never going to receive yourself back as a new person, from reading a self-help book about how to be more confident!

Having the kind of relationship with others and with God, that requires us to give ourselves to them, in such a way that we receive ourselves back as better people – that is the meaning of confidence – and in no way excludes listening properly and fully to those with whom we profoundly disagree.

If you really are confident in what you believe, then you will not have a problem getting to know and listening well to people of other religions and political allegiances and economic views. It is only when we lack confidence that we are led to dismiss, and ridicule, and belittle and persecute others.

And confidence is not going to be conjured up as a result of one conversation, or reading one book or hearing one sermon! Confidence, again, is more likely to be a long term fruit – and more likely to be one that other people identify in us rather than us feeling for ourselves. Confidence as a fruit that is fostered and harvested over the long term cultivation of relationships.

It's interesting that if David wrote this psalm, he did not quote it whilst cruising along Mayfair in his brand new Bentley with the window wound down so that the passers-by can hear Eye-of-the-tiger thumping out through his car stereo. He wrote a psalm that ouses his confidence, whilst in a situation of being belittled, falsely accused, badmouthed and criticised. Even if an entire army arises against him, his confidence is not about to be undermined.

These are not the musings of a deluded, over-confident king who is cock sure of his own rightness and doesn't need to be questioned. The kind of sentiment expressed on my favourite birthday card which had a picture of two Knights Templar on horseback, grinning at one another whilst out in the crusades, one of them saying, "Isn't life simple when you know you're right all the time!"

It's worth remembering as well, that the NIV bible hasn't always been with us. It may surprise you to know that the King James Bible was written during the actual time of Jesus... but is itself only 400 years old. For centuries and centuries, these psalms were not read – nor were they simply heard – but these psalm were inhabited, they were used as part of worship, by a worshipping community who lived and breathed them.

So knowing that the ultimate super-confident King, David himself, is praying this kind of psalm, brings an encouragement of its own. This is not a bunch of self-help guidelines penned by someone trying to make money. These are the heartfelt reflections of a king who knew what it was to be in trouble, to have failed, to have messed up, to have enemies, to be taunted and ridiculed and criticised. But these are also the words of a king, who perhaps more than any figure in Israel's history, bristled with genuine confidence. This, after all, is why David is described as a man after God's own heart.

There is no such thing as confidence outside the context of relationship. You will never receive confidence by mental exertions made in isolation. This, it seems to me, was the point of a talk we heard this week by John Took, on Tuesday lunchtime. His reading of Dante's inferno was essentially this:

That those consigned to hell, to torment with eternal dimensions, have consigned themselves there because they will not reach out beyond themselves to others. Or, in other words, will not confide in others – but end up being turned in on themselves (which in the end is one theologian's definition of sin.) Man turned in on himself. Hell is full of those who will not listen, who blame others for their own woes, who will not relate with the world out there. Dinner parties in hell will probably laugh and joke about Moslems.

But those who find themselves in paradise have discovered what it is to relate to others – to give themselves to others in order to receive themselves back differently. Paradise is full of those who are truly human, persons-in-relationship, ready to ... confide ... in others. Hell is down there in the depths of secrecy and darkness and fear and suspicion – heaven is the place of openness and relationship and friendship and ... confidence.

We can hardly be commanded to be confident – but we can learn to confide well, not just in God in secrecy where no other human being can see what I'm really like. Nor even to confide in God in our public prayers of confession, where we publicly keep secret who we really. But to confide in God in such a way that we cannot help but confide in the real people whom he has sent to us as his ministers, his mediators, his carers, his people. We cannot confide in Christ, without confiding in our brothers and sisters who make up the body of Christ.

Whoever wrote this psalm was in trouble when they wrote it.

And yet, their confidence was not shaken.

That is the kind of relationship, with God and with others, into which this psalm invites us.

