

Ps 28

Another one of David's psalms – seeking God's help against those nasty, evil enemies of his. The psalms are full of these types of hymns attributed to David, and seems to limit our use of psalms in worship. Especially when we remember the warlike nature of King David, and the kind of things he was asking a loving God to do for the sake of his own victories. There are always hard questions to ask of David's psalms.

In 1940, Hitler's war machine had Blitzkrieged its way across Europe with astonishing speed, crushing everything in its path. In 1940, the largest and most technologically advanced army in Europe was the French, - but even the French army found itself annihilated by the German which circumvented its famous defences, split the forces in two – and unleashed its fury upon the French and their allies. Among those allies, was a British Expeditionary Force – over a hundred thousand professional soldiers, forced back across France, stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk, and somehow famously rescued by the navy and an enormous fleet of civilian leisure boats and fishing craft. And when that army had – somehow – miraculously withdrawn, Winston Churchill gave one of his most famous speeches.

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire.

The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us now. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say, "This was their finest hour."

Psalm 28 - This is the kind of psalm I can imagine being read out at Westminster Abbey to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Battle of Britain. It was an incredible battle that raged over these skies between July and October 1940, and for the people of London – of course – it raged on. Last Sunday evening we looked at this a little – lamenting the fact that the Radio 4 service had just a little too much of the “God was on our side, God is on our side feel to it.”

Although there are still veterans of the battle, they are few and far between nowadays – now that it is more than two generations since the battle took place. When I was a teenager, there were a few more veterans around, and I met one of them in Stowmarket in East Anglia, whilst working on an evangelistic project where we had to approach random people in the street and talk to them about Christianity. And I approached this one chap – who beamed at me and said – I'm already a Christian, and I'll tell you why.

And in the Battle of Britain – he was flying a Spitfire, and got caught in dog fight with Messerschmidt fighters over the Thames. And he said a voice came into his head, “Hard bank left.” So he pulled his plane into a steep climb and threw it over to the left. A few seconds

later he heard the voice again, saying “Hard bank right.” So again, he pulled into a steep climb and threw his aircraft over to the right. And when he landed, his friend ran up to him and said – how did you evade the Messerschmidt on your sticks, you couldn’t possibly have seen him. And the old man attributed the voice in his head to the voice of God, kissed the ground and became a Christian.

So, what do you do with a story like that? For a long time, I presumed that the voice in this man’s head was evidence that God was on our side in the battle of Britain. And when you look at the difference this battle made to the war and to the world we live in today, it seems to confirm that – in Shakespeare’s words – GOD FOUGHT FOR US.

And when you look both at the sheer impossibility of a British victory. Sir Hugh Dowding, the Air Force commander, said famously at the outset of the Battle, that if we are to survive, then our young men must shoot down their young men at a rate of four to one. It might seem entirely natural to write the kind of psalm that we have before us here.

This man from Stowmarket, owed his life to the voice in his head, and – as a result – had committed his life to Christ. Is it not the most natural, straightforward conclusion to draw? That GOD FOUGHT FOR US? It is not a conclusion that sits comfortably for me, but it was a conclusion I was reluctantly stuck with until this year – when someone asked me a very simple question, “do you think there are any German pilots with similar stories?”

I looked for some, but couldn’t find any. So they may or may not have happened – who knows. But it did cause me to look again at the old man’s story. And in the midst of battle, you did not have God directing him to shoot his enemy down – if God intervened, then it was only to enable this man to escape with his life. And there is a subtle but enormous difference, I think – between a miracle that directly enables you to shoot someone else, and a miracle that guides you through a dangerous situation so that you escape with your life.

And in fact – Britain did not win the Battle of Britain. Britain did not win the battle of Britain, anyway – because the RAF was absolutely dependent upon pilots, pilots from France, from Czechoslovakia, from Poland, even a squadron of pilots from the USA, more than a year before America joined the war. But the battle of Britain did not have any victors. The RAF did not win the battle of Britain. They only survived it! Of course, the consequences of that survival are enormous beyond comprehension, but again – If we do feel compelled to attribute the outcome of that Battle to the intervention of a loving God, all we can say is that we survived by the skin of our teeth, rather than winning any glorious victory.

I don’t want any of this to take away from the heroism of those who fought, those on the ground and in the air, lost their lives because of this ugly but crucial battle. And we want to acknowledge that for most of us, our experience of living with the threat of an enemy poised to invade and destroy all that we hold precious, is bound to shape our experience of life, the universe and everything.

So it can only be with humility that we come to these psalms of David, passing judgements on whether David was right to conceive of God in the way that he did, to portray God in the way that he did, or to attribute to God the nature and attributes that he does.

In fact, when you look again at the psalm, it is not nearly so crude as it might appear on a first reading. This is not a David who is asking for glorious victory over his enemies. This is a

David seeking survival of his people in difficult times. David is not asking that God will bless his own warmongering. He is not asking God to strike his enemies with bolts from the blue that will give those evil people what they jolly well deserve. David, seems to be seeking from God something much more specific.

Repay them for their deeds; and for their evil work. Repay them for what their hands have done. And bring back upon them what they deserve.

In other words, David is asking that his enemies will reap what they sow, that they will be undone by their own evil, that their own injustice will come crashing down upon their heads.

Not supernatural intervention; not the warmongering of David the warrior king – but simple, straightforward cause and effect seems to be what David seeks.

David is not looking to go out militaristically and put the world to rights by his own mighty deeds. He declares instead, that he is going to trust God to do that! Putting the world to rights is what God does. Worshipping a God who puts the world to rights, is what people are called to do! And when people worship a God who puts the world to rights, far from wanting to fix everything for that God, or on behalf of that God, or to please that God – they simply worship that God.

And when this is the God that is being worshipped, when worship eclipses all else, then the actions which arise from and depend upon that worship, are very different to the crusading mentality of fixing the world for God.

In the last decade we have seen two countries that were invaded by strong allied western forces. And these countries were invaded with a view to putting the world to rights. George Bush religious advisers assured him that it was God's will to invade Iraq – because he could not tolerate the injustices perpetuated there. And when you look at what has happened in those countries, at the effects western intervention has had, at the civilian casualties, at the military casualties – we are a long, long way from King David's approach to warfare.

Looking at the messes made in Iraq and Afghanistan, at the suffering and tragedy and the loss of life ... it will be difficult for the world to look back in 70 years time, with even the faintest notion that GOD FOUGHT FOR US.

We don't know what would have happened had the outcome of the Battle of Britain been different. We don't know if invasion would have followed. If Britain would have fallen. What the knock on consequences might have been. And we certainly cannot claim that GOD FOUGHT FOR US. But – I wonder if, had we been there, and understood the enormity of those events, whether it might not be legitimate to praise God with the very sentiments expressed in this psalm.

No gloating over an enemy. No arrogance at claiming victory. Just gratitude, simple gratitude that we have experienced a deliverance. And this is not merely a political deliverance against a heavily armed enemy, or even a social deliverance from a maliciously minded enemy. David's heart is engaged in this, He experiences joy in his spirit at the God he worships and who delivers him – he erupts into an act of praise:

