

Psalm 55

Opposition – there is something deeply human about encountering opposition: In Greek mythology, every Hubris has its Nemesis – every proud goal of human achievement is limited by intervention from the humbling deity, Nemesis. Sherlock Holmes has his doctor Moriarty, Homer Simpson has his Ned Flanders – Even my little five year old bundle of pink fluffy girliness has her arch-enemy: Felicity, equally blonde, pink and fluffy.

It's difficult to be clear about this idea of opposition though – whether it is good or bad, natural to our humanity, or an aberration sent to scar the human race. But whether through adversity, enemy, opposition – there is something about the struggle to be, that defines us.

Of course, what is definitely natural to humanity, in its fallen state, is the temptation to personify our enemy. To project our struggles in life onto another person, to scape-goat someone else rather than face up to ourselves. And there is a lot of that in the Bible, in characters of the old and new testaments.

But in order to give a human name to our own woes, there are certain risks that we take. I wonder if anyone heard the Radio 4 service this morning? A celebration of the Battle of Britain. Much as I detest war, it probably is the most remarkable, unlikely, impossible outcome for a battle, and especially remarkable where so much of what we take for granted in our world today, might not be a part of our world had the outcome of the battle in the skies over England been different. So, it is understandable that – to some extent, British people want to say thank you to God for the outcome of a battle. But this morning – there was something that jarred a little for me – a little too much of the “God was on our side then”, and God bless our boys today. Sometimes, we can be a little bit lazy in identifying our enemies – because the goodies and the baddies, the victims and the villains, winners and losers, tends not to be as clear cut as we might like to think.

This morning, I arrived in Upminster to bring one of our deacons into church. So I stopped to get some coffee, and parked opposite a Rover garage. Rover, the most British of car companies, that sadly went bust about 5 years ago. But the proud badge still hung over this car show room, with its ancient British emblem. In front of the show room were two young RAF men, clearly on duty to commemorate the Battle of Britain – the English victory over Germany. But it was ironic that, lined up on the tarmac in front of this very English car show room – like a row of Messerschmidts – was a line of big, shiny black Mercedes Benz cars. And in front of them, these two RAF chaps, celebrating the English victory over Germany! It seemed more than a little ironic.

Goodies and baddies, victims and villains, winners and losers, Us and Them – it all gets mixed up when you start to immerse yourself in reality. Now in some sense, of course, there are times when the actions of one nation, or one person towards another – are clearly wrong. But even then, the reasons why people and nations act the way they do, often has more complex motives and causes.

So instead of hearing, and understanding, and relating to those against whom we struggle, it is much easier, to consider them our enemy! They are evil, we are good. We heard that talk behind both Gulf Wars, where a tiny scratch of the surface reveals that evil is not so easily externalised. We heard it on the Radio 4 service this morning – they are evil, we are good.

And we hear it from the lips of David, not only throughout the psalms, but in the psalm we heard this evening.

Poor old David. Nobody likes him. Everybody hates him. He's cheesed off with Jerusalem and just wants to get away. That, really, is what the psalm is about. If psalm 55 does originate with David, it probably comes from the later part of his ministry. You have here, none of the exciting, jaw-dropping swash buckling adventures of kingdom-building.

What you have instead is someone who's had enough, who can't stem the tide of crime in the city and bitterness amongst his people. And you can probably picture David, after a tough day at the palace, relaxing on his terrace with a glass of wine, watching the sun set, overlooking busy streets and drunken shouting and frustration that he has not brought paradise into this place.

None of this could possibly be the fault of king David... No. We see this with lots of David's psalms. Not much in the way of, "maybe I made a mistake with this." No – you have it in the famous repentance psalm, 51. Where David has been caught out, and is forced into making his confession about murdering someone's husband so that he could take her for himself. David had little choice but to be repentant there.

But here and elsewhere throughout the psalms attributed to David – there's a lot of wining and complaining about the so-called enemy. People who are just out to cause trouble for poor old king David. And there is something deeply telling about the nature of this enemy, here in the psalm. This is not a foreign danger. This is not the Philistine horde amassed at the gate. This is not a pretender to the throne, wanting to challenge David in mortal combat. None of the excitement or danger or thrill we sometimes encounter in David's life.

No the context, is just that of mundane, daily life. And there, most importantly – he identifies his enemy. In people he has worshipped alongside, in people he knows and loves. In the midst of this beautiful city, a city – of course – that was newly conquered, that has only been the capital of Israel for a decade or two. And when there are no enemies at its gates or even at the borders – enemies emerge closer to home.

And it's only a question – but is there a tendency, when there is no serious struggle we face in life, we have to create one. When there is no enemy at the gates, we then make enemies of those within the gates?

One of the great rivalries in the British psyche, is that in football, between England and Germany. Of course, it isn't mutual. I don't think the Germans care that much ... but in England... And when England lose their place in the world cup, - what do the papers do? They turn on our own team – making an enemy of them!

But this is as true in the church as it is elsewhere! For many Christians, the forthcoming visit of the Pope this week, is a cause of profound discomfort. For many Christians, the Roman Catholic church is the enemy – and that enemy is personified in the person of the pope. The historian David Starkey – who was my next door neighbour at Fitzwilliam college in Cambridge – says that when he was growing up, for his mother, the only thing worse than being divorced was being catholic!

And let's be clear – this isn't only because of the child abuse scandals that have dogged the Roman Catholic church. About 15 years ago I went with a journalist friend to a place in Norfolk called Walsingham – where each year there is a parade from the church carrying ancient relics and a shrine around this little sleepy town.

And we turned up to watch this, and found that there was a second pilgrimage, much much larger than the first. Hundreds of evangelical Christians had turned up, with bright clothes, and placards, and guitars – and they had turned up with the sole purpose of piling abuse upon the other worshippers gathered there. It was an unbelievable sight – and they got their guitars out like weapons, and sang Christian choruses about victory over demons at high volume as this ancient, traditional procession made its way through the village.

Apart from wondering why some Christians have got nothing better to do – it was a blatant display of how easily Christians externalise evil – us and them, good and evil, - and when you talk to these people, all they want to do honour God, and be faithful to scripture – they have only the church's best interest at heart. Genuinely – but how easily we transfer guilt onto others, and fail to see any in ourselves.

I think, the Christian saints whom I know and look up to, are those who have learned this kind of lesson the hard way. People for whom age and experience have not made them arrogant, bitter or over confident – but for whom age and experience have shown them just how little of the world they know for sure, and yet somehow, they radiate true wisdom in the best sense.

Because it is all too easy to carve the world up into our different categories. We heard David Starkey doing it in his typical modernist way this morning. The tired, clichéd distinction between religion and politics, between what a religious leader should and shouldn't do, and what a political leader should and shouldn't do. And the reality is far messier than this – there is no religion that is not deeply political, and there is no politics that is not deeply religious.

But the moment we begin to carve the world up like this, we find ourselves doing the same with good and evil, friend and enemy, us and them! The church, the world, and our lives – are messier than all that. And that is the world in which we encounter God.

A God who is not just up there, but down here.

A God who is not just out there but in here.

A God who was not once upon a time, in a far away land – but a God who is present – who presents himself to us, and who calls us, here and now, to present ourselves to him.

Back to David... poor old David. He's not the most appealing figure in Scripture – but somehow, I can't help finding something warm about him. Always, he seems to leave a question mark against his own potential arrogance. He is described as a man after God's own heart – and you get the sense that this hunger, to know the heart of God, is one that is never far from him. We even find it in this psalm, with the invitation to cast your case upon the LORD – and you can almost read this psalm as a process through which David is trying to do just this. And in that sense, it comes to us as a messy, questionable, naïve, frustrating, act of worship that takes us through the journey of David's own messy, frustrated, life – in which he nevertheless encounters God. By the end of the psalm – he is still seeing others as bloodthirsty and deceitful – but, as for me, he says – I will trust in you. The psalm ends not with David promising to fix everyone and slay his enemies, - but he does cast his cares upon the LORD, and here, he seems to throw up his hands – and commit himself afresh to trust in God.