

Pentecost: Psalm 104

With four small children, it is not uncommon in my house, to find modern day equivalents of the jam being licked out of the sandwich: sausage rolls are found, stripped of their pastry – the actual meat left untouched. Fish fingers are found, deprived of their breadcrumbs – looking like a sad white block of untouched processed fish meat. Custard creams are found – relieved of their custard... I suppose either, my children will grow out of doing this. Or they will become lectionary writers.

Today's readings have come from the Revised Common Lectionary, and are almost identical to those found in the Church of England's Book of Common Worship. And the psalm we heard this evening, is deeply appropriate for Pentecost Sunday. It speaks of the wonders of God's creation, and emphasises how every creature is granted its life by the Spirit of God. What could be more fitting, when we want to celebrate the presence of God's Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. The third member of the Trinity, the presence of God here on earth, the lifeblood of the church.

And it is, of course, in the Holy Spirit that the Church lives out the Gospel, in the power of the spirit that the Church proclaims the Gospel, and at Pentecost we celebrate that we now live in the age of the Spirit.

The only trouble is that the psalm as we heard it, is deeply misleading. Why? Because the Lectionary has skipped the embarrassing verse that – to modern ears – contradicts all that goes before it. And what we are left with, when we take a pair of scissors to the Bible, is no longer psalm 104, but a crudely edited version – more palatable, less embarrassing, easier to swallow.

The trouble is – smack bang in the middle of these beautiful and familiar words of praise, comes this awful verse about sinners vanishing from the earth. It stands there like a huge, looming dark shadow of a question mark. So what do we do with it? Ignore it, as though it were some unwanted, embarrassing guest at a party? Do we pretend it's not there and just get on with all the nice stuff? Do we assume that with our evolved sensibilities we would not be so crude as to include this kind of sentiment in our worship? Or could it be – that herein lies the key to understanding this psalm properly? All too often in Scripture, the stone the builders have rejected becomes the chief cornerstone.

“May sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more.”

The logic of the psalm seems to be a declaration that God has created a wondrous earth, furnished with beauty in every aspect, and the only thing that spoils it – is that there are some nasty people living here, and if we could just get rid of them, everything would be just as God intended it to be...

So – appeal is made to the Spirit who creates and sustains the earth, to get rid of the baddies. In fact, the omission made by the lectionary is all the more surprising because this awful verse is not just an awkward phrase we can skip over. This verse is the climax of the entire psalm. All that follows it is the phrase with which the psalm began.

When I was posted to Wales in the Royal Air Force, one of the first things I was told by my rather arrogant and xenophobic Warrant Officer, was that Wales is a beautiful place, and the

only problem with it is that it's full of people known as the Welsh. And doubtless we've heard the same kind of phrase used in most different countries. But that, it seems to me, is precisely where this psalm leads us. Nothing could be less fitting for Pentecost, when we celebrate the fact that God's Spirit is willingly poured out upon "all flesh"!

I suggest that to worship using the words of this psalm, is to understand it in context. Lots of the commentators will point out that the psalm as a whole is taken up with the transcendence of God over his created order – how the Spirit is Lord of the natural world. The trouble is, that for the people writing this stuff, and the people first using it – they did not have access to Google earth. The earth would not be thought of in general terms – the earth was the ground beneath their feet, the land they farmed, the animals they saw, the rains that fell, the sun that beat. Sure, there is awareness that the natural world spreads further than their own experience or knowledge –

But this is not a psalm about the world in general. It is this world, where we live, specifically – hence the reference to the trees are the cedars of Lebanon, not of planet earth. This is a people deeply related to the land. The promised land that God had given to them. And yet there was no guarantee that this land would remain theirs.

There was no Geneva convention. No land that wasn't up for grabs if your army was big enough. And throughout the history of Israel we know that the people lived with constant threat of war and invasion. So when raiding parties and empire's armies come storming into the Land that God gave to the people of Abraham – how are you going to describe them? How are you going to feel about them? How are you going to bring those concerns to the God who created this beautiful land and gave it to you? How could these marauders be better described than with the words of that ominous, missing verse? "But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more."

If you were living in the time and place where this psalm was written – if you had seen with your own eyes the devastation that had been inflicted upon this land and this people – wouldn't it be natural to write a psalm climaxing with the words, "but may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more"?

By the time we come to the New Testament, this prayer is fulfilled, but not in the way that we might have expected... Our reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome reinterprets this desire. In Romans chapter 8, we read that the Holy Spirit sets us free from the law of sin and death. Here, there is forgiveness for sins. A remedy for sinners. This is a holy spirit that brings all people, gentiles included, into the family of God. It is by this Spirit that we all people may have a share in the blessing of God.

Sinners and Wicked people are not destroyed, exterminated. They are forgiven, healed, adopted. If you read the whole of Romans chapter 8 you can hear in Paul's tone almost, that his prayer would also be "that sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more."

In fact, it is here that Paul says the whole creation is on tip toe, the whole created order is eagerly awaiting the sons of God to be revealed, those who are filled with the Spirit to bring the first fruits of the spirit.

So if we allow Paul's logic to interpret the way we read the psalm – then this psalm with its awful climax, finds itself fulfilled more fully than its authors could have imagined. This is

precisely what Jesus did with the hopes of Israel: leaving his mother Mary, leaving John the Baptist, leaving faithful people utterly confused that this was actually the Messiah – because in the first instance he does not appear to be healing the wounds of his country. But ultimately, with his death and resurrection, the hopes are fulfilled more deeply and world-changing-ly than anyone had imagined. We had thought it was he who would redeem Israel

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When we re-read the psalm in light of all that Jesus did, and we make this hymn our own – where does it leave us?

Maybe it leaves us praising the Lord, because the wickedness and sin of this world is being dealt with.

Maybe it leaves us praising the Lord because we are invited to play a part in working for justice and righteousness.

Maybe it leaves us praising the Lord because we have received the gift of this beautiful world, and – beyond all imagining - have been given a part in bringing further beauty to it.

Maybe it leaves us praising the Lord because we are the wicked and the sinners, and yet we have been drawn into the being of God himself.

Maybe it leaves us praising the Lord because we see the world and ourselves differently.

