

24 ‘My truth also and my steadfast love shall be with him ♦
and in my name shall his head be exalted. *Psalm 89:24 BCP2004*

To set the scene for my thoughts this morning I am going to tell of an experience I had early on in my ministry that I have shared with you before. It was shortly before Christmas in Finglas and I was in the house of Sophie O’Neill. Sophie, by that stage well into her eighties lived in a house near the village which she shared with her son John. Sophie had been widowed early on in life and was left to look after her only son, John who was Downes Syndrome. Against all well meaning advice to place John in care, Sophie dedicated herself to care for John. They were regularly seen in the village, regularly seen in Church. Life was hard. On that evening I visited Sophie, John was sent out to make a cup of tea. I looked around the room, sparsely furnished. Sophie obviously spotted this and simply said, ‘You know Mr Brew, God is good.’ Everything in that house seemed to say otherwise but she said it with a sincerity and conviction that I have never forgotten.

I would just ask you to keep that in the back of your minds as I go on to reflect on the Psalm appointed for this morning, Psalm 89:20-37.

The psalms fulfil a particular role in our worship, in our lectionary, our ordered reading of scripture that goes far beyond the musical tradition associated with them. They serve as a reflection on our reading from the Old Testament. The Old Testament reading this morning is the account in 2nd Samuel of David’s vocation as King, the promise of descendants, the unique place that the line of David had in the life of Israel. It speaks also of the relationship between God and King being that of Father and son.

Psalm 89 is one of the Royal Psalms and we have read a portion of it today. The Psalm itself can be split into three distinctive parts. The first 18 verses

proclaim the greatness and the majesty of God, God's power among the councils of heaven, over creation and his protection over Israel as his particular people.

Then comes the section that we have read this morning that celebrates David's unique place in the purposes of God, God protection of him,

- 26 'He shall call to me, "You are my Father, ♦
my God, and the rock of my salvation;"
- 27 'And I will make him my firstborn: ♦
the most high above the kings of the earth.

And with this there is the promise of descendants and the permanence of his line.

- 28 'The love I have pledged to him will I keep for ever, ♦
and my covenant will stand fast with him.
- 29 'His seed also will I make to endure for ever ♦
and his throne as the days of heaven.

Running through these two sections is a particular pairing of words that we find in verse 24:

- 24 'My truth also and my steadfast love shall be with him ♦
and in my name shall his head be exalted.

Throughout the Psalm, the word that is translated as 'truth' in this verse is elsewhere translated as 'faithfulness', but it is the same Hebrew word. Similarly, the word translated here as 'steadfast love' is elsewhere translated as 'love' or 'loving kindness' but it is the same Hebrew word 'hesed', a covenant love, an enduring love. There is a holding together of God's truth, God's faithfulness and God's steadfast enduring love.

Even should David’s descendants turn away from God’s Law, incurring the consequences of their disobedience, the steadfast, enduring love of God remains.

- 32 ‘I will punish their offences with a rod ♦
and their sin with scourges.
- 33 ‘But I will not take from him my steadfast love ♦
nor suffer my truth to fail.
- 34 ‘My covenant will I not break ♦
nor alter what has gone out of my lips.

Moving now to the third part of this Psalm, we have moved from the time of David, a golden age in the life of Israel, to one of its darkest times. Jerusalem is in ruins, her enemies triumphant, the nation humiliated as the period of Exile in Babylon approaches. The anguished cry goes up in verse 49

- 49 Where, O Lord, is your steadfast love of old, ♦
which you swore to David in your faithfulness?

Where O God is your ‘hesed’ your enduring, steadfast love of old?

That I would suspect is a cry that is echoed in the hearts of many down through the years as they have looked on natural disasters, on the sickness and death of loved ones. Where is God in all of this? Is God even there, is God even listening, does God even care?

The prophets of this time of soul searching get a sense of God with his people, even in the midst of their suffering, even in the midst of his apparent absence.

We read in Hosea 11:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,

.....

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.

.....
My people are bent on turning away from me.
To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.
How can I give you up, Ephraim?

.....
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

.....
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

This is ‘hesed’, this is God’s unfailing, unswerving, steadfast love in the face of all rejection, all disobedience. A God who continually reaches out.

This is the ‘hesed’, this is the God we encounter in the person of Jesus Christ. In his life of teaching and healing, in his suffering and death, in his resurrection, we get a full measure of his words to Nicodemus:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. *John 3:16,17*

Loved the world, in all its messiness and contradictions. He promises to be with us to the very end of time, in good times and in bad, in times of sorrow and in times of joy. This is ‘hesed’. This is God’s unswerving, unfailing love.

I go back to that memory of Sophie O’Neill in her home in Finglas that winter’s evening and her simple statement, ‘You know Mr Brew, God is good.’ That lady had a vivid understanding of ‘hesed’, God’s unfailing, unswerving

love, that sustained her throughout her life, that I, for one, have never forgotten.