

May 24 2009

Easter 7B

Sermon notes on Psalm 1

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At a first glance there is a beautiful simplicity in this, the first of the psalms: Happy are those who delight in the law of the LORD ... they are like trees planted by streams of water, [whose] leaves do not wither. Who would not want to be such a "tree" – nourished, strong, not to be moved. But, with closer attention to the whole of the psalm, objections leap up. Is not the poet just a little naïve when he declares that, ⁴ *The wicked are not so [blessed], but are like chaff that the wind drives away?* Certainly the psalmist speaks of the failure of the wicked "in the judgement", but experience would suggest that "sinners" often stand "in the congregation of the righteous", and it often seems that the way of the wicked does not perish – or not quickly enough for our liking.

One way of dealing with this contradiction is to cast it all to some end-time judgement when all things are sorted out, but this seems to strain the language of the psalm rather a lot. More than that, an end-time resolution isn't particularly comforting for those who do delight in God's instruction and yet suffer greatly at the hands of others, and such comfort would seem to be the point of the psalm in the first place.¹ The apparent simplicity of the thought of the psalm is in fact not simple at all, and our objections on the basis of our experience or that of others can make it almost say nothing helpful. We might well wonder: what *is* the blessedness or happiness of those who delight in the law of God?

A satisfactory answer hinges on our understanding of "law", and a *Christian* understanding requires that "law" be held in *God's* creative tension with "gospel". We know of "law" in two main senses. The first is law as it is written down for us as a moral code. This includes such things as the Ten Commandments, as well as the laws which our parliaments continue to create and modify so as to maintain some kind of moral order in the complexity of our day-to-day dealings with each other. These are laws which, we know, can be "broken". To "break

the law" is to fail to observe a requirement which God or society has laid upon us.

The other kind of law we know about is that suggested by a phrase like "the laws of nature". An important characteristic of these laws, at least at the level of our usual engagement with the world, is that they are entirely predictable.² That is to say, generally speaking, these are laws which cannot be broken. The offence we might take at the miracle stories recounted in the Scriptures arises from our sense that nature is orderly, and things necessarily happen only according to predictable patterns: people can't walk on water and waves cannot be stilled with a command. Natural laws cannot be broken. If we really thought that they could, we could not trust the seat we go to sit in, or the brakes we apply to slow our car, or the aeroplane we climb onto. Planes crash not because the laws of nature have failed but because they are relentless: gravity *always* sucks, and everything on a flying machine has to work according to natural laws which are just as dependable in order to balance gravity's unforgiving character.

So we know of the breakable moral law, and the unbreakable natural law. But the important thing is this: we tend to assume, or even to *desire*, that moral law work like natural law. We desire that, should I do the moral thing – the *right* thing – I shall be rewarded accordingly. We seek predicability in the results of our actions. And so also vice-versa: when the moral law is broken, we desire a natural law consequence: that "the wicked" be blown away "like chaff", as our poet puts it. This is the kind of thinking we hear in our psalm today: to delight in the law of *God* and to meditate upon it day and night is to create the conditions for blessed and happy life, implicitly free of the ravages of those who delight in other laws. Whether it is moral law or natural law, law is, it would seem for us, about cause and effect.

And this is where the problems begin: because too often it seems that the "effect"

¹ See, for example, the comfort intended by the similare "blessed"/"happy" declarations of the Sermon on the Mount (

² This does not apply, of course, at the level of quantum physics, where predictability only applies through probability.

we see is one of bad people doing well. The *cause*, then, is not that God's law is obeyed, but that it is not. It seems, in fact, more the case that "the wicked" (to keep using that slightly archaic term from the psalm!) understand the way of things better than the good, and have discovered just *which* law it is which needs to be observed in order to get ahead. They now know how to manipulate the moral and the natural laws in order to maximise the desired outcome.

But, when it comes to discussing such things, however, it is too easy to focus on "bad" people.

It's always more interesting to consider the "good" people that we are (of course!), and how we are ourselves caught up in just these problems. What are we to do when with heart and mind we do delight in the command of God, and yet in the living of our lives we see that we do not observe it? Are we really any better off than the "chaff" the psalmist waves off into the wind? If we do fall short of the glory of God, and if even the moral law is really about cause and effect, are we not already lost? Who could *rightly* imagine themselves to be among the blessed the psalmist speaks of, if we are honest with ourselves?

In fact it is only those who know a deeper law which does not have to do with cause and effect who find themselves beside a flowing stream from which provides the living water they need. This deeper law is the law of love – not our love for each other, or even for God. The waxing and waning of such love creates our anxiety in the first place. The law of love begins with God's love for us, a love which precedes anything we might do, and so which is not dependent upon our actions but upon God's simple decision to love. St Paul declares that those who seek to stand only by the things they have done are under a curse, implying that it is in fact impossible to live a life of such righteousness. Surprisingly, and in contrast to the natural sense of our psalm, the "wicked" for Paul become those who are *sure* that they have done the right thing.

In Jesus, however, the law is set in its right place, our wrong-headed understanding of it is brought to an end (cf. Romans 10.4), and a simple reversal takes place: our obedience to God's command is not the context within which God loves and blesses us; rather,

God's love and blessing is the context within which we might tend to God's commands. For us, it all begins with faith – not faith that God "exists", but faith that *faith is enough* to stand justified before God and those around us.

There is, no doubt, much we have yet to learn about how it is that we should live in relation to each other, and so much benefit to be had from looking to the specifics of what God demands. But if it is possible to "believe in vain", as we heard St Paul suggest on Easter Day³, we can also "act" or "obey in vain", and this must always colour what we make of our own actions. If wanting to obey God's commands is itself not enough to set us right before God, then the blessed one and the wicked one of our Psalm are the same person, both oriented around the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. The streams of water the psalmist speaks of is the freedom of the children of God, who know themselves to be safe and secure, and so who have no *need* to transgress, to live selfishly and without concern for the needs of others.

It is when we know ourselves already to have all we really need before God (cf. Ps 23.1) that God's law becomes the best way to live.

May we pray then, that God's people discover anew the life which is already theirs in the Christ who is both the psalmist's tree and stream – the sign of a life lived in God and the nourishment of such a life – that his blessedness may be ours, and we might find our rest in him. Amen.

³ See the sermon delivered on April 12 2009.