

Psalm 8 Sermon

Do you remember the Apollo 11 first moon landing in 1969 when Neil Armstrong spoke the famous words “One small step for a man, one giant step for mankind” ?

Here in the UK, you, I believe, had to stay up late at night if you wanted to see it on TV, as it actually happened, and was beamed back to NASA. I was lucky enough to be living in Rhodesia at the time, so we saw it during our school day. We were all ushered into our assembly hall where the TV had been set up (we didn't have one at home in those days) and we all sat and watched and listened, absolutely awestruck.

What struck you most ? Was it the powdery surface ? The astronauts bouncing around ? The dark sky ? The immensity of space ? Or maybe just how small WE are ? I wonder what sort of a Psalm David would have written had he seen it all. He made a pretty good description of our feelings, even though he was writing centuries before:

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him ? Yet you made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour”.

We have looked at David the shepherd boy, underestimated by his family, underestimated by Goliath, a man of compassion yet full of faults, even extending to adultery and murder. A king who was unashamed to dance before the Lord.

He was a man of many gifts. How was it that he knew how to read and write, as many of his contemporaries would not have done. One might have thought that as he was the 8th son, sent out to look after the sheep on the hills all day, his father Jesse might not have thought it necessary to educate him. Yet alongside his gift with the slingshot, vital for protecting the sheep and himself against the attack of wolves, he was obviously known to be skilled on the harp. A courtier of King Saul had heard of him and he was called into the King's employ in order to play his harp and calm Saul's foul moods. And together with all this, he had the gift of poetry, which gave us so many of the Psalms.

There are Psalms of anger, psalms of anguish, psalms of despair, psalms questioning God, psalms worshipping God – but they all have something unique and distinctive about them. Most of the Bible is God's revelation to us; we experience it as God's words to us. God revealing Himself to us. But the Psalms are different: the Psalms are human speech talking back to God, taking the initiative with God. They do not aspire to rise to the status of revelation. They are not from the top down, as it were. In the Psalms, we begin from the human side, and often a very emotional human side. Often in David's Psalms, he calls out to God in great distress, as we too can do. It is alright to be honest with God, to be angry, to shoot questions at Him. He knows what we are thinking anyway, and as we are honest with him, our relationship grows. Here in Psalm 8, David expresses joy and awe and reverence – the sort of feelings we experienced on sharing in the first landing on the moon. And again, this is something we too can do: sending up exclamations of joy and delight, just brief sentences “Oh God, that is amazing”, as we look up at the night sky for example.

The young shepherd boy David would have had many opportunities to consider the work of God's fingers. Living here and not in the centre of a city, we all have a the chance to experience it. And now, as we are being told we are the 1st generation to realise that we are in danger of ruining it

and may be the last generation to have the chance to reverse that ruination being brought about by ourselves and the global warming we are causing, it is more vital than ever that we take the words of David's Psalm to heart.

We were asked by several nature conservation organisations to make last month "No mow May", to allow the grass to grow on our lawns so that spring flowers could provide pollen for early insects. Almost all blue-tit nests have failed this year because the young hatched before there were enough insects for their parents to feed to them. Leaving lawns to produce daisies and other small flowers can help a great deal. We have had other joys. Two ears have appeared above the grasses and a rabbit has lolloped slowly into view, stopping to nibble there and there as he approached quite close and unconcernedly, before raising his head and after a moment, making his way calmly back into the undergrowth.

I was delighted to hear over and over again the call of the cuckoo, which has been missing for several years from the haunts where I used to hear it before in Norfolk.

As W. H. Davies said in his poem, "What is life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?" Or better still in the words of Psalm 104, "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. Praise the Lord, O my soul, praise the Lord"

Here in Psalm 8, David reminds us of our responsibility: "You made us ruler of the works of your hands, you put everything under our feet, all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea" – a reminder of God's charge to us in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. What are we doing with that responsibility?

And there is another question: "What is man that you care for him?". For out of the whole of God's creation from stars to sea creatures, it is only mankind who can look at it with the understanding to ask such a question, only we who can acknowledge the Creator, only we who can talk to Him, praise Him, thank Him. It is only we who can understand that he did not create a meaningless, empty universe but that the created world is to be a home to us because he loves us. And it is only we who can obey his wish for us to look after his gift of a world to us.

May I finish by wishing you time to experience God's love through quiet moments in his creation, with this Gaelic blessing:

Deep peace of the running wave to you, deep peace of the flowing air to you, deep peace of the quiet earth to you, deep peace of the shining stars to you, deep peace of Christ, the light of the world to you, deep peace of Christ to you. Amen.