

His Holy Arm

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[0 : 00] You'll find it helpful if you open your Bibles to Psalm 98 on page 529. I begin with a confession. The older I get, the more sympathy I have with Scrooge.

Despite the best work of the Royal Mint to rename this the season of giving, I want to rename it the season of complaining.

Just let me complain for a moment. I think if you, well let me speak about myself for a moment. I think if I was to replay the words that I had spoken during this last week and took out all the sanctimonious, self-righteous hubris, I think the basic tenor of my voice would be one of complaining.

And I'm a pretty positive person. I hear it around about me. We are so ungrateful. As we meet this morning, you know that there are fires ringing Sydney, the city of Sydney in Australia.

And when this happens there's always talk of prayer, prayer for rain. And if God sends rain, which he did last time, it would take precisely 48 hours for people to forget God and begin complaining again.

[1 : 22] And the problem with ingratitude is not so much that it's unattractive or it feeds on itself. The problem with ingratitude is that it is directed towards someone.

And that's why it's so difficult for us in this season, the older we get. And it's so difficult for us to learn to sing with Mary, my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

It's almost as though we need to learn a new language or a new way of being. It's almost as though we need a new song, one that is not driven by my own interests.

And of course, this is not going to happen automatically. It doesn't come from being told to cheer up, put on a smiley face.

What we need is something outside of ourselves, something that doesn't originate within my own self-pity. I think what we need is the holy arm of God.

[2 : 28] And that's what Mary sings. Do you remember in the Song of Mary she says, God has shown the strength of his arm and he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts.

And when she refers to the holy arm of God, Mary is drawing on a tradition from the prophets in the Old Testament and the Psalms, particularly this Psalm, Psalm 98, which is well known to all Anglicans as the Cantate Domino because it comes right in the middle of the evening prayer service between the Old Testament reading and the New Testament reading.

It forms a bridge between the New Testaments because it reaches right back to creation and right forward to the new creation and tells us how we are to be now. And although it's in a group of Psalms of praise, it's called the Orphan Psalm.

And the reason is the first word, the heading, which is part of the text, in the Hebrew is simply Psalm. It is, it's the only Psalm in all the book that is simply called Psalm.

And I think it's because it is the Psalm. It's breathtaking in its breadth and it's exhilarating in its feel and it's vital for us today. And what the three sections of the Psalm do, what they attempt to do, is to drag us out of our own self-obsession by looking back to the victory of God and looking forward to the coming of God and putting a new song in our mouths.

[4 : 11] And we're going to look at the three sections and I warn you, I'm going to spend a long time on the first section. So don't get discouraged. Let's read, shall we?

Let's look back to the victory of God and read verses 1 to 3 together. O sing to the Lord a new song. Good.

You didn't read that as well as the 9 o'clock service. And they read it badly. Now the Psalm doesn't waste any time before we are commanded to sing a new song.

The reason is because God has done something and he's done something to create a new situation that offers new possibilities and new hopes and a new reality. And what God has done is simply this, he has gotten victory with his holy arm.

Verse 1, verse 2, verse 3, I hope you noticed three times the word victory is used. Victory is the basis of singing the new song and you might think that is an extraordinarily distasteful idea.

[5 : 39] I mean, it sounds like a hockey headline or a military victory. I mean, surely you can't be serious that God is involved in fighting.

But the key to understanding this is the same word as salvation. Every time this Psalm refers to the victory of God, it is referring to the salvation of God.

But victory is the right way to translate it. Because every time God works salvation, he has to fight for it.

Salvation never takes place without opposition and deep resistance. You see, we flatter ourselves to think that somehow we sought out salvation.

God is very fortunate that we found him. Or somehow we contribute to our salvation. Or that somehow we were eager, but God was reluctant.

[6 : 42] But the very opposite is always true. Salvation always encounters deep, ongoing, intractable opposition.

And it requires nothing short of the right arm of God. Now that is true of every part of salvation. Just think back for a moment to the great act of salvation in the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament.

When God drew his people out of Egypt. Do you remember that God had to work a double act of salvation? The first was, and we are familiar with this, he had to overcome the opposition of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army.

But perhaps we are not so familiar with the fact that God also had to overcome the opposition and complaining and resistance of the very people that he was rescuing.

Do you remember the high point of the rescue from Egypt? When God had brought them to Mount Sinai. And he says, I have brought you out on eagle's wings to myself.

[7 : 55] I have provided for you a secure future. And they heard the very words of God at the bottom of the mountain. And the Israel said together, All the words of God that we have heard, we will do.

And as soon as God finished speaking, then they take off their jewelry and their gold and they melt it down and they form a calf. And in an act of unmitigated ungratitude, they bow down and worship the golden calf.

And we fool ourselves if we think that we are any different. It is exactly the same. We did not ask Jesus Christ to come from heaven to save us.

And even after we come to believe in Christ, we resist him and we place obstacles in the way of his salvation in our lives. At almost every stage of the life of faith, we act as though we know better than God does.

As if we cannot fully trust him. Every act of salvation earns our fervent opposition. And that is why the salvation of God takes nothing less than God's holy arm and his right hand.

[9 : 09] And the holy arm of God is the Bible's way of saying that salvation is something that God does alone. The prophet Isaiah tells us that it was the holy arm through which God, by which God created the world.

The book of Deuteronomy tells us that it's the holy arm by which God drew his people out of Exodus. And Mary tells us that it is the holy arm of God by which he sent his Christ into the world. God secures our salvation and he did not have any human help in doing it. It's through his strength alone. And that point is drawn deeper in verse 2 when we read he made known his victory he revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

And the word vindication is the same word as righteousness. For the way in which God draws his victory and wins his salvation for us is not by brute force but by revealing his holy arm.

And I don't think you can see that anywhere more clearly than in the coming of Jesus Christ. If you and I had been advising God on the sending of Jesus Christ do you think that we would advise him to save the world by sending his son as a baby?

[10 : 31] Do you think that we would give him the advice that the best way to deal with humanity's great enemies sin and Satan and death was by having his own son abused and ridiculed and rejected and finally crucified in our place?

I don't think that would have occurred to us, would it? It would have been the last thing we would have suggested. But the Bible says that when we look at Jesus Christ dying on the cross that is where we see the righteousness of God.

That is the revelation of the holy arm. I still hear people today say something like that we have a good angel on our right shoulder and a bad angel on our left shoulder and we feed the good angel by doing good things and we feed the bad angel by doing bad things and if at the end of our life the good angel is fatter than the bad angel that God will accept us into heaven.

Well I can't think of a way to affront the righteousness of God more fully. He does not save us by our works but because of his own righteousness.

That is why the Apostle Paul says that the gospel is our salvation because in the good news the righteousness of God is revealed.

[11 : 49] And God is not just content to achieve it he wants to reveal it to us as well verse 2 because it is utterly impossible for us to discover it for ourselves without the power of God.

We cannot discover the righteousness of God we cannot discover the salvation of God under a microscope or a telescope through philosophy through our working for it it is the gift of God and it is his to give.

It is God who reveals salvation in our hearts and minds and in every time and in every place and in every person where salvation comes to us it is because of God's direct intervention.

It doesn't matter if you came to faith slowly it doesn't matter if you feel you have been searching for years the Bible says it is God who draws us it is God who opens our eyes it is God who shines it is God who saves us and unless he reveals his son to us we will forever remain in the dark.

But that is his desire and I think that is the point of verse 3 he remembered his steadfast love and his faithfulness to us. You see God so loved the world that he gave his son.

[13 : 12] Now before we leave this first section let me just take you to the right to Isaiah for a moment. If you would turn in your Bibles to Isaiah 40 on page 633.

Isaiah one of Isaiah's favorite ideas is the arm of God.

Look at verse 10 in Isaiah 40 these are familiar words to us this time of year. Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him his reward is with him his recompense before him now he will feed his flock like a shepherd and he will gather the lambs in his arm singular he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

You see the arm that rules in verse 10 is precisely the same arm that gathers the lambs to his bosom.

The ruling arm is the carrying arm. This is very important you see the same arm that has secured for us our victory and our salvation draws us and keeps us close to the heart of God.

[14 : 43] That is why there is such joy in Psalm 98. It is the arm of God that has scooped us up. It is the arm of God that carries us towards heaven and every time we stray and every time we wander it is the arm of God that draws us back to the person of Jesus Christ.

And when we meet him face to face we will see with all clarity that it was his arm his steadfast love and his faithfulness that has drawn us there.

And in 10,000 years time our song will be exactly the same as it is in this psalm. He remembered his love and faithfulness to us.

That's why it's so vital for us to look back and refresh ourselves and understand the victory of God. Well let's quickly look at the third section looking forward to the coming of God verses 7 to 9.

Now I wonder if you would read these verses through in Psalm 98. Let the sea roar and all that fills it the world and those who dwell in it.

[15 : 53] Let the flood clap their hands let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the people.

Now the reason that the floods and the hills and the sea are all so excited about the coming of the Lord is because when he comes it is not just to bring salvation to us.

The mountains and the hills and the islands are very excited they dance and roar because this physical creation is not just the backdrop for our very important lives it's not just the stage on which we strut backward and forward creation is part of God's purposes and since the Garden of Eden its destiny and our destiny have been caught together.

The creation is caught up in our sin and I don't just mean by that that we pollute the world. The Apostle Paul tells us that the creation groans it's been locked in a slavery in a cycle of death and

decay and futility and creation waits with eager longing we are told leaning forward to the day when God will come to judge the living and the dead because when Christ comes those who belong to him our bodies will be redeemed we will be revealed as the children of God and this world will be remade and liberated from that decay and from death to share our glorious liberty and you know what?

The floods clap their hands and the hills rejoice at even the thought of it and that is what we celebrate at Advent you see we look back to the coming of Jesus Christ and forward to the time when he will come again when he will remake everything so that we can sing a new song so what should mark our lives now?

[18:00] well the answer is the middle section let's read verses 4 to 6 finally make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth break forth into joyous song and sing praises thank you joyful joyous joy joyful and there's a spontaneity about this and notice please there's no particular style of music commended although there are the lyre is mentioned twice and the trumpet once and so that's one of the reasons why we have a trumpet in our service now let me just tell you that John Wesley says this sing lustily and with good courage beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep

Wesley was an Anglican clergyman but lift up your voice with strength be no more afraid of your voice now nor more ashamed of its being heard than when you sang the songs of Satan break out into joyful noise you see in this psalm it's not the liturgical icing on the cake it's not just bringing things together so that we'll feel better it stands right at the center of the psalm between the victory of God and the coming of God and it is the way in which the salvation of God is revealed in all the world this only occurred to me between the services the way in which the righteousness of God is going to go forth into the world is as we make the joyful noise as God works his salvation as he is coming to judge we participate in that work of salvation not just with our hearts and our minds but as we say oh Lord open our lips and our mouths show forth your praise we rehearse the salvation we spread the salvation as we lay aside our complaining and learn how to make a joyful noise before the king and how much more reason have we got to do this than the psalmist or even

Mary we have seen the face of the savior we know the life he lived we know the death he died and how privileged it is for us to be able to see just how his holy arm has gotten the victory we know that by bearing the curse of our sin he has opened the door of the blessing of god for us we know that by dying in our place he has opened the way for us to receive eternal life we know that because he was pushed out of the presence of god we are now welcome into the presence of god and if this all this all sounds just a bit too positive remember what it cost him he was made sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of god and this is where we stand today after that coming and before the next and with all of creation we wait for the day when he will come to judge the living and the dead when all the books will be open and he will judge the peoples with equity so sing to the lord a new song look forward to that renewal amen come lord jesus which is being a new time he will move and continue