



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 16th January 2022

Readings: *Isaiah 62.1-5; Psalm 36.5-10; I Corinthians 12.1-11; John 2.1-11*

Words go in and out of fashion.

I recall a phase – maybe we are still in it - when people would describe anything vaguely alright as *brilliant*: the weather, a biscuit, the England cricket team, and so on.

Time was when anything a bit suspect was *dodgy*. The milk past its ‘use by’ date was dodgy, the Australian cricket team’s tactics were dodgy, and so on.

More lately, you may have noticed how anything profoundly complicated or challenging is summed up with understatement as *tricky*. All sorts and conditions of speakers do it: politicians and journalists, academics and preachers alike.

And another word of the moment is *binary*. Of course, one has always known what it means, but it has become far more common today. We seem to use it either to highlight how an argument has two very distinct – binary – sides, or to suggest something is more nuanced than a simplistic contrast, that is ‘not quite as binary as that’. And, of course, many help us see that whatever our own feelings, their experience of being human is inadequately expressed through the simple binary of male and female.

Well, there is a sense in which we can see in Psalm 36 quite a binary representation of our spirituality and religious comprehension. In the verses we sang a few minutes ago, Michael Morgan captures something of the beauty of God: God’s faithfulness, God’s righteousness, God’s redeeming love, in all of which we can find the source of our faith and hope. As Morgan renders the Psalm, because of this understanding of God, we can ‘drink the cup of pure delights and taste the pleasure of the Lord’. It’s not very far from the enticing imagery of today’s Gospel passage, where encountering God in Jesus Christ is like imbibing a wine than which there is none finer. It’s why we need annually to re-hear the Bible’s exquisite narratives of Jesus’ life and work, his teaching and healing, his death and resurrection ... because they remind us of how, of why the God he reveals is ‘the wellspring of our lives’. ¹ It’s ‘brilliant’.

But that is not where the rather binary Psalm 36 begins.

If we had used its opening verses we’d have been taken to a far darker place. Do you remember how the book Genesis has Adam blaming Eve for his disobedience, and then Eve whining that ‘the serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ ² Disobedience symbolised in a snake. Well, one understanding of the start of Psalm 36 finds crime itself as a similarly personified figure. So Robert Alter’s Psalm 36 leads us immediately into what almost feels like a cosy dialogue with everything that is contra God. We learn of how ‘Crime’s utterance to the wicked within [their] heart [makes them believe] ‘there is no fear of God before my eyes.’ And so the psalm’s opening sequence continues by talking of how evil strokes us with its eyes, and ‘the words of its mouth are mischief and deceit’. ³

For me, it’s this candid depiction of life’s binary nature that makes Psalm 36 such an authentic expression of my own spirituality. You see, whether I am watching the news about corrupt or compromised government, defending a shop assistant being verbally abused and humiliated by a customer, or learning of how some people traffic others for their own gratification or greed, I am easily persuaded that transgression, crime, evil – call it what you will – masquerades in personified form. Moreover, how easy it is ourselves to be susceptible to its wiles. The bit of Psalm 36 that the lectionary doesn’t invite us to use, is this sobering sequence at the start where sin is depicted as infecting our thoughts, our words and our actions. Indeed, nestling amidst the poetry there’s evocative language intimating how crime so caresses and flatters us that we’re no longer aware of our sin. We’re captivated and drawn in. Maybe that explains why an elder – not

¹ Psalm 36.9, as in Michael Morgan’s *Psalter for Christian Worship* 2010

² Genesis 3.13

³ Alter, Robert 2007 *The Book of Psalms: a translation with commentary* New York & London: W. W. Norton page 136

here – once complained to me about there being a prayer of confession Sunday: ‘I don’t need that’, he spluttered.

I do not presume to speak for you, but I do know my own need of confession – of honest acknowledgement of just how binary human living is. Aren’t parts of most people’s lives a bit dodgy? Surely, few of us are exempt from ‘the human propensity to [mess] up’, as Francis Spufford so nearly puts it.⁴ It is cathartic, indeed, crucial to make the sentiments of the General Confession our own:

We have erred, and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

We have offended against your holy laws.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;

*and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. ...*⁵

Only having allowed the opening of Psalm 36 to speak to us, or for us, can we then turn to the passage we sang this morning, with its rejoicing in God’s redeeming love. Is it not as we confess our faults that we can really benefit from God’s grace? You see, there *is* a party to be enjoyed – however soberly we prefer to celebrate - but it’s not a party because of how brilliant *we* are. It’s a party because of how brilliant God is; God’s *hesed* - that steadfast loving kindness which we neither earn nor deserve, but receive as gift from God - the ultimate expression of God’s freedom not to reject but to redeem, not to destroy us but to delight in us. And just as the Psalm personifies crime, so in the cross and crown of Christ, God personifies that saving grace - the One for Others, who asks only that we respond to God’s love by the way we live towards others. That, after all, is surely the ultimate party.

In a world that can feel a mite tricky - frankly as ‘forsaken’ and ‘desolate’ as Isaiah suggests Jerusalem once did - we need those who will declare in word and action these promises of God; those who will not keep silent, will never rest. Paul is right: we are like a body with many different parts, to whom the Spirit gives a variety of gifts, which are to be used for common good. Amongst those gifts is the readiness in this binary world to set alongside the shadowlands of coronavirus and tsunami, of nastiness and narcissism, the inexhaustible jar of God’s goodness and grace, and never more so than when we reliably speak the truth, relentlessly pursue righteousness, and resolutely love as God loves us in Christ.

Let it be so, even as we listen to this piece of Handel, and are quenched by the living water.

Music for Reflection

De torrente in via bibet (He shall drink of the brook in the way), from *Dixit Dominus* (The Lord said), by George Frideric Handel (1685 - 1759), arranged for four solo voices and Organ specially for this service by Ian de Massini.

N. P. Uden

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⁴ Spufford, Francis 2012 *Unapologetic: why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense* London: Faber & Faber page 27 et al

⁵ Book of Common Prayer 1928 *General Confession* altd