

Sunday 21st August 2022 – HALLEL PSALMS (4) – Psalms 117 and 118 ‘His love endures forever’

One of my recent interests is a certain fascination with polar explorers. I’ve just finished reading the biography of John Rae, who has become my new hero. For my money, John Rae is the greatest polar explorer of them all, despite the fact that nowadays almost no-one has heard of him. Back in the mid-nineteenth century – and bear in mind that the Victorians were obsessed with Arctic exploration, explorers were the superstars of the day – Rae led no less than four Arctic expeditions, completely achieving his objectives on three of them and, apart from one unfortunate soul, bringing all of his men on every expedition home safe and sound.

Rae was way ahead of his time, pioneering techniques which Amundsen used 50 years later to conquer both poles. Ironically it was his very success which inadvertently led to a political campaign against him and condemned him to obscurity, helping to birth the British love of what we might now call ‘heroic failures.’ But I digress – what we love about explorers are those astonishing feats of endurance. During his expeditions, Rae man-hauled heavy sleds literally thousands of miles, survived temperatures down to -50C, lived for months hunting fish and seals in barren landscapes and generally performing feats of well-planned derring-do which make us gasp as we sit in a comfy armchair reading about them.

Endurance is a precious commodity. **So much of what constitutes success in life relies on our capacity to endure.** Thomas Edison, when asked about his ongoing failure to make a working light-bulb, famously replied: ‘So far I’ve succeeded in discovering thousands of ways not to it.’ His perseverance was, of course, ultimately rewarded.

And at the heart of today’s psalms is the word endurance too: only this time, applied to the Lord. And perhaps, if you’re anything like me, it’s not a word you instinctively apply to God: you might think about love, or mercy, or holiness or majesty – but endurance? Think about it some more, though, and you come to realise that **most of all the other great words we use to describe God only work if those qualities endure.** If God loved for a bit, or was merciful for a bit, but then got bored of it, we’d all be in trouble, wouldn’t we?!

So today, we learn in Psalm 117 – the shortest chapter in the bible, for fact geeks – that firstly what endures is God’s faithfulness. When everyone else gives up, God doesn’t. He remembers his promises, he remembers his people and he sticks by them.

And then in Psalm 118, we get this phrase repeated five times: ‘his love endures forever’. It’s what begins the psalm and ends it. Just as the life of faith ultimately lives wrapped in God’s love – so **the Lord’s enduring love is the beginning and the end of the psalmist’s song of praise.**

This psalm really draws together all of the threads of the previous psalms. As in Psalm 113, the mighty works of God are praised. As in Psalm 114, the particular rescue of the Passover is declared, using some words from the famous song of Moses and Miriam straight after the crossing of the Red Sea: ‘The Lord is my strength and my song, he has become my salvation.’ (v14)

As in Psalm 115 the importance of placing our trust in God and not ourselves is emphasised: better than trusting human leaders, the procession heads for the temple to give God the glory. And as in Psalm 116, the psalmist remembers a personal rescue from a life-threatening situation.

So it's easy to see why this Psalm concluded the Passover celebrations. It draws everything together in a great hymn of praise. But, what's so striking is that in the last few verses of the psalm, there are big clues that *this is not the end*. Yes, the Lord's mighty acts in the Passover rescue will be remembered forever – but maybe something even bigger is around the corner.

This psalm does not just look back, it looks forward. This is especially significant given that whoever wrote it could have had little idea what exactly was being looked forward to. But as the history of God's people unfolded in the New Testament, and prophets began to promise a new, and greater, act of salvation, so the words of this psalm began to assume a prophetic importance. What or who was the cornerstone? Who is the blessed leader who comes in the name of the Lord?

Fast-forward to the New Testament, and specifically to the events of Palm Sunday, and the answer becomes clear. **As Jesus enters Jerusalem, heading for the temple courts with a great procession (just like the backdrop of this psalm), so the words of this psalm form the heart of the narrative.** As Jesus enters through the gates of the city, the crowds shout verses 25 and 26 of this psalm: 'Hosanna (or save us)! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' In other words, this is the new salvation act, the new passover, the new rescue – and the new anointed rescuer to lead it.

In case we missed it, the next day at the temple Jesus quotes Psalm 118 again when debating with the corrupt religious leaders who wanted him gone: 'the stone the builders (i.e. you lot) rejected,' he warns, 'has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this (like he did before) and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

Perhaps most poignantly of all, Jesus would have had the words of Psalm 118 ringing in his ears as he left the Passover meal (which we know as the Last Supper) and headed out to the Garden of Gethsemane. 'The stone the builders rejected... Lord, save us...' A part we didn't read just now would perhaps have been most important of all: 'I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.' (v17)

As we come to share bread and wine in a few moments' time, we remember the great, global rescue Jesus came to win, prophesied in Psalm 118, and fulfilled at Passover time in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. And we, too, cry out in our hearts: 'Lord, save us!'

Most of all, we remember that the Lord's love endures. It didn't give up on Israel over the centuries. It didn't give up on the world, sending Jesus to enact another great act of divine rescue. And it doesn't give up on us. Whatever you face today, whatever we face in this season, may we all have grace to seize again this great truth: his love endures forever. 'You are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good: his love endures forever.' Amen.