

## 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – Lent 5 – Pathways of Prayer – Psalm 46 ‘The contemplative path’

When we first moved to MK we brought a lovely Flymo mower with us. It was perfect for our little lawn in Bristol – as the name suggests, it flew over the grass and was a pleasure to use. Those of you who have seen our Rectory garden here will know that we have *quite a lot* of grass. When the time came for its first cut in our first spring, Alise got our lovely Flymo mower out and began to cut. It took her 5 ½ hours. At the end, she was exhausted, and suddenly a proper mower became the most important purchase we were going to make as we transitioned to life in MK. So we bought a second hand Toro, a self-propelled beast with a 22-inch cutting blade and a mulcher on the side. By the summer Alise had her cutting time down to an hour and a quarter – and her life back!

Today we’re looking at Psalm 46, a famous and wonderful Psalm which is one of many people’s favourites. But I’m going to start by talking about a little word – a boring word really, a small preposition we almost always overlook: and that’s the word **with**. **It may be a small word, but in the bible it’s also a powerful word, because it describes God’s desired relationship to us:** God was with Abraham, and with Moses, and with David, and with Esther, and then in the form of Jesus, came to this earth as Immanuel, which means ‘God *with* us’.

We are made to live with God – but because the Lord gives us free will, ultimately we have a choice between two ways to live: with God, or without God. And if you’ll allow me to return to our lawn for a moment, the contrast between the two is like the contrast between the self-propelled Toro and the little push Flymo. When you think of it like that, it’s a no-brainer, isn’t it?

And if we look at today’s psalm, what we see right in the heart of it is a simple chorus – it’s there in verse 7 and repeated in verse 11, and it reminds us of this fundamental truth, this little, simple boring word that so often gets overlooked: **‘The Lord Almighty is with us.’ We can never repeat these words too often.** The Lord Almighty is with... who? Someone else? Only talented people? Or powerful people? Or those who can buy anything they want? No – the Lord is with... *us*.

And this Lord is Almighty – or in the old language ‘of hosts’ – i.e. he’s got all the powers of heaven on his team. He’s got the juice, the beans, use whatever language you like: he’s the real deal. If, like me, you grew up with the wrestling on ITV on Saturday lunchtime, this Lord is the Big Daddy of the ring. And this God, the Lord Almighty, is with us.

And this gives us shelter in the storms of life. Because this God is with us, he can be our fortress. And let’s note how the name of God switches now to the God of Jacob. Why? First it reminds us that **this God relates to individuals** – he is not just the God of a people, a large group, he is not just our God, he is *my* God. He knows each of us personally. **Second, he is eternal** – Jacob lived hundreds of years ago, but this God is the same yesterday, today and forever. The God of Jacob is the God of David, is the God of the Sons of Korah who wrote this psalm, and is the God of Matt and Alise and each of you.

And **third, this God is faithful** – Jacob was a sly old goat, he cheated his brother and then ran away, he was a great manipulator, and even the name God gave him – Israel – means he wrestles with God. Jacob took on Big Daddy, and survived. And the Lord blessed him, and he became the father of the nation, of God’s people who took his name.

It's interesting how the very name of God's people implies struggle – with God and with the challenges of life. This is a real God for real people. And this psalm was written in a season of challenge – Israel was under attack, they were always a small and vulnerable people surrounded by much more powerful nations. Where would they turn for help? Verse 1 of the Psalm – its very beginning – tells us: 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.'

When everything else is crumbling, one refuge stands firm– the eternal fortress: the Lord Almighty, the God of Jacob. Everything else may be in chaos, nations may be in uproar, kingdoms may be falling, the waters may be raging around you, the very ground on which you stand may be giving way – but there is a rock to stand on, a fortress which will not give way. This fortress will not fall.

And this is the simple word for us today. The world seems to be in ever greater chaos. And maybe your world is in chaos too. Maybe you feel at the mercy of larger forces over which you have no control. Maybe the waters are raging, maybe the earth is giving way. **It's time to step inside the fortress, the one place where you can be secure – into the arms of the Lord**, the Almighty one who is with you, as he was with Jacob and the Sons of Korah and all who went before you. Trust in this God and he will help you at the break of day. PAUSE

I've got most of the way through and I haven't even mentioned the most famous verse yet: **Be still and know that I am God**. This is the one picked out especially by our Lent course, encouraging us to spend more time contemplating God – being still before him. But in these last couple of minutes can I encourage you to think of this verse in two different ways, to imagine it being spoken in two different voices. If you google this word, you'll get so many inappropriate images for this text – of people sitting quietly next to glassy lakes and sunny evenings – but that's not the context of the psalm, is it? The psalm is written in a time of chaos – floods and earthquakes and wars. And the voice of God which delivers this phrase in its context is majestic and powerful, the voice of a being who, as it says in the verse before it, 'breaks the bow and shatters the spear, burns the shields with fire.' A God whose voice makes the earth melt. So really, **the voice which delivers it is, firstly, a voice of power for our situation: 'BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD!!'** It's a voice which thunders, as this God alone is exalted among the nations and in the earth.

This is the voice of Jesus in our gospel reading. How do you think Jesus calms the storm: with a gentle whisper? 'If it's all the same to you, would you possibly mind, o waves, just being a little tiny bit smaller than you are?' No, it's authoritative: BE STILL!

And of course, this miracle absolutely picks up on Psalm 46 – this is Jesus' psalm 46 moment, as it were – no wonder the disciples looked at each other nervously and said: Just who *is* this man?

But there are two ways to read this verse, because if it is, indeed, a voice of power for our situation, **it is also a voice of presence which brings peace**. As we acknowledge the Lord's power *externally*, so we receive his peace *internally*. As the psalm ebbs and flows, like the mighty waves it describes, the command to stillness brings us back to where we started, to the chorus: The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. 'Breath through the earthquake wind and fire: O, still small voice of calm; o, still small voice of calm.'

Today, let this be a word both of power and of presence for you. If you need a big God for your situation, seize faith that this Lord is all you need. And receive, too, the peace of his presence. It's that little word again, and may that little word bless you now and always: the Lord almighty is *with* you. He is with you. Be still. Amen.