

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 30 DECEMBER 2012
CHRISTMAS 1
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 8 (New Revised Standard Version)
Matthew 2:13-23



“Murder of the Innocents”

“We’ve all got both light and dark inside us.
What matters is the part we choose to act on.
That’s who we really are”

JK Rowling, ‘Harry Potter and the order of the Phoenix’

O Lord our Sovereign, how wonderful is your name in all the earth!

There are times, when we look up at the skies, or spend time enjoying the beauty of creation, or when life is good and filled with happiness, these are words we may recognise and identify with.

Sometimes it happens that joyfulness and praise just bubble up with words similar to the ones the psalmist found many centuries ago. Not because your life is without its challenges, not because you don’t know about all that troubles the world, but just because suddenly, overwhelmingly, you can be filled with the feeling that your life is brimming with positives, with things to be grateful for, with friendship, love, happiness, music, the sky above and the earth under your feet.

That’s when it can happen that you suddenly see God’s name written all over everything, that everything seems to radiate with joy.

Such an all encompassing feeling of joy is a precious experience. I remember it from years ago when, on a trip to Israel, in the Sinai desert a friend and I had gone for a bit of a night time walk and we suddenly found ourselves in this deep, profound silence under an incredibly clear sky full of stars. An experience I will never forget. Or sometimes it happens when I look at my children. And see what very special, unique and precious individuals they are. That feeling of having been given an incredible abundance to be grateful for.

They are usually not every day experiences. Sometimes we have to live off them for years. Because life gets tough and there truly isn’t that much to be joyful about. Because there is hardship, and difficulty, illness and grief, because we are lonely and one bleak day follows another. Even then the glow of these experiences will stay with you like peaks of joy in the landscape of your memories and soul, as something to cling to when things aren’t as bright and right as they could be.

It is probably one such an experience that inspired those beautiful opening lines to the psalm, lines which speak of the joyful wonder of God’s greatness and goodness, and the appreciation of the beauty of creation. Lines we may find ourselves in wholehearted agreement with at some times, but we may find we have trouble with, when things aren’t that crash hot in our lives, or when we watch the news and see the devastation and hurt that goes on in the world.

God's name majestic across the whole earth? For the moment it seems more like suffering, pain and violence dominate every corner of the globe! There is no evidence God's enemies have been silenced. There is illness and heartache, bitterness and hatred, hurt and pain all around. And whenever that pushes itself to the forefront of our minds, it may be difficult to agree with this psalm and joyfully praise God's name.

In the middle of that beautiful creation, opposite this awesome God, we see the psalmist moving to portraying God and all humanity as small, fragile, fallible. What are human beings that you are mindful of them? Especially at the moments when praise and joy fill your heart, especially when you experience God's greatness and goodness, one can, as a human being, become deeply and frightfully aware of our relativity, our fragility, our fallibility. Can we feel how powerless and helpless we can be against the suffering and pain of this world, against fate which so often ordains differently from what we may hope for. May we become aware how little control we have, how much there is that is, quite literally, beyond the reach of our minds, hearts and hands.

What are human beings that you are mindful of them so ponders the psalmist. Who are we that God remembers, is interested, cares for us?

Little lower than God we were made: so many possibilities and opportunities, so much we can do. Crowned with glory and honour. That's how God created us, that's how God wanted us according to scripture.

A beautiful concept we would love to believe, but that may be hard to hold onto when we look around us and watch the news or experience hardship and difficulty. Little lower than God, yeah, well.... sometimes it might make you wonder... if we see what people do with all that potential, that power, those opportunities. The havoc they wreak, the devastation they cause

Doesn't the Bible present what people are capable of? What they do to each other? A little lower than God, crowned with glory and honour?

The second reading of today shows that scripture is very much aware of what that big, devastating evil people can wreak. People like King Herod, who would probably have deemed himself closer to being divine than most. Outside scripture he entered history as one who reigned with glory, majesty and splendour, around the beginning of the Common Era. Inside scripture we find this gruesome story about him ordering all babies and toddlers in Bethlehem killed, because he feels they might pose a threat to him somewhere down the line. History outside scripture tells us he deposed several family members to ensure he'd keep his throne, scripture moulds these historic facts into a tale which echoes with the story of the Moses and Pharaoh ordering all male babies in Egypt killed many centuries before. It indicates that it is very aware of what people do, and how across the ages terrible atrocities occur, where fear and great power combine. The story we find in scripture may be an adapted and altered version of what really happened under King Herod and around Jesus' birth, but it is a story that in the history of the human race has repeated itself in so many different shapes and sizes that it doesn't really matter how you tell it and if you get all the historical detail right.

In all its terrible cruelty scripture does not recoil from telling this story. Without embellishment, cool, businesslike, it is put to us, as a story that happens, and that keeps happening. A story that, unfortunately, isn't that exceptional.

So, today, in our readings from scripture, two things are put alongside each other: The experience of awe and wonder about the greatness of God and gratefulness for all we, as people, receive from God's hands in the way of beauty, power, and opportunities and the unimaginable cruelty and abuse of power that can occur when that power and those opportunities end up in the wrong hands.

Through them we are confronted with a choice: only a little lower than God, scripture tells us it is in our hands that creation has been entrusted to us, in all its beauty, opportunities, and chances for goodness, love, compassion and beauty to flourish, but equally in all the possibilities it offers for bad choices to be made, for violence and cruelty, neglect and abuse.

In the mean time God's name remains set over all the earth, keeps holding us, pushing for his dream to become reality. Unobtrusive, unpretentious, but strong and persistent, against all chaos and resistance, in spite of everything people are capable of doing.

And another thing we hear in the story about the killing of the innocents. The one child that is to play such a key role in the history of the world, that one child in whom God becomes human, escapes the murderous intentions of Herod. The darkness does not overcome the light. God's history continues, no matter what those who deem themselves gods may do. At unexpected moments, in unexpected places, from the mouths of babes, the strength of God keeps being established. Through the small, weak, and dependent God's strength and victory continues to become evident against the odds, against the tide, an inextinguishable light in every darkness.

So we may know God with us – now and in whatever lies ahead in the future. Amen.