

**‘LIKE RAIN THAT WATERS THE EARTH’
PSALM 72**

[St Mark’s Northbridge Christmas Message – 2021]

Last Saturday afternoon, as I do most Saturdays, I played cricket. You might remember last Saturday afternoon? It was hot. Properly hot. There was no breeze. Just the energy-sapping, and at times suffocating heat. I batted. I bowled. I fielded. And at the end I was exhausted. These days on Saturday nights after cricket I usually feel like I’m 70 years old. Last Saturday I felt about 80. I was sore. And I was tired. I came home and lay in the bath for a while. I turned the air conditioning on. Eventually I creaked up the stairs to bed. And just as I got to my bedroom I could hear the rain outside. So I flung the bedroom window wide open and was greeted by the sound and the smell of relief. The rain fell. The heat began to dissipate. And an incredibly welcome cool breeze started to pass through my bedroom window.

And that moment when the rain began to fall on the parched baked ground- that moment is what Christmas is like. And my aim tonight/today is to explain to you why I say that. Christmas- like rain that waters the earth. Let me tell you why.

To do so I want to go back to Psalm 72 which we read earlier. It’s probably not a reading from the Bible you’d expect at a Christmas church service, but the more you come to understand it, the more Christmassy it appears. [Slide]

The book of psalms in the Bible is basically a collection of ancient songs- all around 3000 years old. And they were often a kind of sung prayer- used in ancient Israelite worship and on various special occasions. Some historians think this one may have been written for the coronation of a new king. It’s attributed to Solomon- the son of the great King David. And basically this psalm is a prayer for God’s blessing on Israel’s king, and thus, a prayer for God to bless the people through the king, and for this blessing to flow to the whole world. In the Ancient Near East it was common for people to see a link between power and possibility¹. And this psalm captures that kind of hope.

Let me remind you of what we read. The psalm begins by asking God to make Israel’s king just- like God himself is just. And the psalmist anticipates that under a just king, the people would prosper. And in part this would be because a just king would come to the aid of the afflicted and punish those who oppress people. The psalm prays for a reign of justice, righteousness, and compassion. [Slide]

¹ James L Mays, *Psalms*, p.236

And this is why the psalmist also prays that this king would reign forever- enduring as long as the sun and moon, through the generations. And the psalm asks God not just that this king's reign would be long, but also wide. Verse 8 says this: 'May he rule from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.' The psalmist imagines this king being so well known and honoured, even in foreign lands that far flung kings would bring their tributes and gifts to him. [Slide] This hoped-for king would be so great that these other kings would even bow down to him. And they would honour him for the same reasons that his own subjects do- because he cares for the vulnerable. He is compassionate. He is even able to save the needy from death! And he rescues people because they are precious to him.

[Slide] And the psalm finishes by reprising some of these themes. The psalmist prays that the king's reign would be long. That he would be prayed for and blessed by his people. That under his rule people would prosper and flourish in every way. And that through him the ancient promise to Abraham would be fulfilled- that all nations on earth would be blessed.

[Slide] And it ends with praise to God who alone can answer this prayer. God who can fulfil these lofty hopes.

But did you notice? When the psalmist searches for a poetic way of describing what the reign of such a king would be like, where does his mind go? [Slide back x 3] Verse 6: 'May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth.' It's an evocative image isn't it? If you've grown up in Australia, I reckon you can not only see that image but you can also smell it! Having a king reign over you who is righteous, and just, and compassionate is like the storm at the end of a hot Saturday that cools everything down and refreshes the earth. It's like the water God sends to feed the roots and cause fruit to grow. A king like this nourishes his people, and makes true prosperity possible. A reign like this is not suffocating or oppressive like a very hot day can be, but instead it's refreshing and delightful- like when the rain comes.

It's a sweet picture isn't it? And it represents a noble longing. Praying for good government and leadership makes sense now just as it did 3000 years ago. Some may argue, in fact, that this is one of the most pressing needs of our time- that we would be ruled by people of kindness, integrity, and wisdom. And the writers of the New Testament urge Christians to pray for precisely this. But these days, even as we pray for such things, do we not find ourselves being cynical about the possibility of that prayer being answered? How likely is it really that we'd be governed by people like the king Psalm 72 describes? Does it not seem like an idyllic picture that's really just a bit naïve? Is a hope like the one this psalm expresses just likely to end in disappointment?

There are good reasons to believe, aren't there, that that's true? We are regularly let down by our leaders. And we're well within our rights to ask whether the world has ever seen a leader like the one the psalmist prays for here. As one writer says about this psalm: 'The chasm between calling and capacity yawns under the feet of every king for whom this prayer was made.'² Perhaps when it comes to leaders trying to live up to this standard, the best we can hope for is 'partial success and eventual failure'³. Even the outstanding rulers don't last. They certainly don't endure as long as the sun! The famous Baptist preacher of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon, put it like this: 'We see on the shore of time the wrecks of the Caesars, the relics of the Moguls, and the last remnants of the Ottomans. Charlemagne, Maximilian, Napoleon, how they flit like shadows before us! They were and are not...'⁴

But. But what if? [Slide back] What if there is a king who God has endowed with his own justice? What if there is a king who lived and who demonstrated an impeccable care for the afflicted, who showed deep compassion to everyone he met? What if that king welcomed prostitutes, tax-collectors, and sinners? What if he healed the sick, delivered those oppressed by evil, and relieved those labouring under a cruel burden of religious expectation? [Slide] What if this king was honoured by kings from distant shores, even when he was a baby? [Slide] What if those foreign rulers even bowed down to him, and wanted to serve him? And what if that king had the power to deliver every needy person who ever cried out to him- not just in his day but in every generation? What if he actually had the power to save people from death- both the power to protect people from dying, but also the power to raise the dead? And what if he not only wanted to defend the righteous, but actually had power to find sinful people and make them righteous?⁵ What if this king had power to rescue everyone, and at the same time to help everyone he rescued know that they're precious in his sight? And what if this king died a most famous death not because he was vanquished by his enemies but because he chose to die for the sake of others- bringing together in one profound moment both divine justice and divine compassion? And what if this king really does endure as long as the sun, what if he really does reign forever because he didn't stay dead but rose to eternal life and rule? And what if, what if, because he now lives and reigns, those who come to him and trust him are ushered into a life of prosperity and flourishing that is altogether better and more beautiful than any kind of prosperity the world offers without him? What if that were all true of one king, a king who lives today, a king whose rule we can enjoy now and forever, a king who was anticipated by this 3000 year old prayer? I trust you can see why this really is a Christmas psalm.

² Mays- p.237. He also goes on to describe the psalm as a 'prescription for failure' (p.238)

³ Mays- p.238.

⁴ Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms – Volume 2*, p.602.

⁵ Boice- p.602.

The other night at our service of Carols and Readings we sang the carol ‘Angels From The Realms Of Glory’ and I was really struck by a line in that carol I hadn’t especially noticed before. This line: ‘Though an infant now we view him, He shall fill his Father’s throne.’⁶ What a remarkable thing to say. He shall fill his Father’s throne! And it seems to me to be a wonderful summary of what this psalm is in the Bible to tell us. That though the baby we celebrate at Christmas just looked like any other infant, he would grow up into a power which had earth-altering potential. And in his life there would be no yawning chasm between his calling and his capacity. He would not be partially successful but ultimately disappointing. Rather, he would come to fulfil every lofty hope this psalm expresses.

And not just in his lifetime. He was the great hope of the ancient Israelites. He was the compassionate and just king amongst his contemporaries when he walked the earth. But he is also now, this very night/day the leader, the government, we long for and need. When I read you that quote before from the preacher Charles Spurgeon, I left off the last line. Let me read it to you again now in full: ‘We see on the shore of time the wrecks of the Caesars, the relics of the Moguls, and the last remnants of the Ottomans. Charlemagne, Maximilian, Napoleon, how they flit like shadows before us! They were and are not; but Jesus forever is.’⁷

And if that’s true, if Jesus forever is, and if he is the perfect king Psalm 72 hoped for, and if though an infant at birth he now fills his father’s throne, then he can’t be ignored. And my encouragement to each of you tonight/today is that in the year ahead you resist every temptation to ignore him, and that, instead, you give him the attention, and the honour he deserves.

Some of you may’ve heard the story of Matt Doran the Australian journalist. He’s the host of Channel 7’s Weekend Sunrise show and in November he flew to London with a film crew to interview the singer Adele. But he went in to the interview without having listened to her new album. Prior to the interview he’d been emailed a copy of it, which he now says he just missed. But at one point in their conversation Adele asked him if he’d listened to the album and he had to admit he hadn’t. Clearly Adele was very disappointed with his answer. And, as a result, her management have refused to release the interview footage. So what was meant to be a major exclusive for 7, has turned into a very embarrassing gaffe.

Of course, for Matt Doran, this was quite humiliating. But he simply made an on-air apology and he’s kept his job, and the news cycle has moved on. The implications for him personally aren’t really that great. But the implications of making a mistake when it

⁶ See also the words to the hymn- *Hail to the Lord’s Anointed* (based on Psalm 72).

⁷ Boice- p.602.

comes to Jesus are much greater. The Bible says that one day we'll all meet King Jesus. And it would be a huge mistake to arrive in that moment unprepared. So my exhortation to you this evening/morning is to make sure you're familiar with his body of work. Don't turn up to the interview with Jesus without having listened to his album.

So many people in our society today would say they have some kind of belief in Jesus and yet have never, as an adult, even read one of the gospels about his life. And if that describes you, can I encourage you to make this your new year's resolution. To pick up a gospel, to read it, and to come to your own conclusion about who he is and what he's done. To make a decision for yourself about whether he really is the king Psalm 72 imagined. And, if he is, to consider whether you're willing to submit to his rule. I'm convinced that if you will live as a subject in his kingdom, then you'll know the true prosperity that the psalmist said his people will enjoy.

And if that's already your experience, if you know what it is to be a prosperous subject in his kingdom, then I encourage you this Christmas to bow down to him, as those kings from the East did 2000 years ago. And I encourage you to praise the God who sent us his Son. Like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. [Slide x 3]

'Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvellous deeds.
Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory.'