

Year C

Psalm 30

The story is told of King Canute who was once ruler of England. The members of his court were continually full of flattery. “You are the greatest man that ever lived...You are the most powerful king of all...Your highness, there is nothing you cannot do, nothing in this world dares disobey you.”

The king was a wise man and he grew tired of such foolish speeches. One day as he was walking by the seashore Canute decided to teach them a lesson.

“So you say I am the greatest man in the world?” he asked them.

“O king,” they cried, “there never has been anyone as mighty as you, and there never be anyone so great, ever again!”

“And you say all things obey me?” Canute asked.

“Yes sire” they said. “The world bows before you, and gives you honour.”

“I see,” the king answered. “In that case, bring me my chair, and place it down by the water.”

The servants scrambled to carry Canute's royal chair over the sands. At his direction they placed it right at the water's edge.

The King sat down and looked out at the ocean. "I notice the tide is coming in. Do you think it will stop if I give the command?"

"Give the order, O great king, and it will obey," cried his entourage

"Sea," cried Canute, "I command you to come no further! Do not dare touch my feet!"

He waited a moment, and a wave rushed up the sand and lapped at his feet.

"How dare you!" Canute shouted. "Ocean, turn back now! I have ordered you to retreat

before me, and now you must obey! Go back!”

In came another wave lapping at the king’s feet. Canute remained on his throne throughout the day, screaming at the waves to stop. Yet in they came anyway, until the seat of the throne was covered with water.

Finally Canute turned to his entourage and said, “It seems I do not have quite so much power as you would have me believe. Perhaps now you will remember there is only one King who is all-powerful, and it is he who rules the sea, and holds the ocean in

the hollow of his hand. I suggest you reserve your praises for him.”

King Canute was wise but so often human beings are not. Have you ever felt as strong as a mountain?

A person who calls himself frank and candid can very easily find himself becoming tactless and cruel.

A person who prides himself on being tactful can find eventually that he has become evasive and deceitful.

A person with firm convictions can become pigheaded.

A person who is inclined to be temperate and judicious can sometimes turn into someone with weak convictions and banked fires of resolution . . .

Loyalty can lead to fanaticism.

Caution can become timidity.

Freedom can become license.

Confidence can become arrogance.

Humility can become servility.

All these are ways in which strength can become weakness.¹

I think it is fair to conclude that the psalmist was not in a good place. It is very likely that

¹ Scharly, D. 1993 *Bits & Pieces* pp. 3-4.

he or she was suffering from a life threatening condition or illness and God's mercy had brought healing and deliverance. The reference in verse 3 to Sheol and the Pit should not be understood as referring to hell. In fact there is no theology of hell or heaven, for that matter, in the Psalms. These are later concepts that would develop in inter-testamental Judaism and Christianity. No, Sheol is the place of the dead; it is the land of shadows, a half-life which is really no life at all. God has delivered the Psalmist from death itself. God has met the Psalmist at the place of absolute weakness and helplessness

and has brought deliverance. But it wasn't always like that for the Psalmist. The middle of the Psalm is like a flash back to the way things were. Life was so good that the Psalmist could proclaim; "I shall never be moved because God has raised me up like a strong mountain." Isn't it great when we feel like that? Isn't it great to aspire to such feelings and to find joyful fulfilment?

George Mallory was the famed mountain climber who may have been the first person ever to reach the top of Mount Everest. In the early 1920's he led a number of attempts to scale the mountain, eventually being killed

in the third attempt in 1924. His body was found in 1999, well preserved by the snow and ice, 27,000 feet up the mountain, just 2000 feet from the peak. Give up he did not. His body was found face down on a rocky slope, head toward the summit. His arms were extended high over his head. His toes were pointed into the mountain; his fingers dug into the loose rock, refusing to let go even as he drew his last breath. A short length of cotton rope – broken – was looped around his waist.

When Mallory was asked why climb Everest this is the reply he gave:

“The first question which you will ask and which I must try to answer is this, ‘What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?’ and my answer must at once be, ‘It is no use’. There is not the slightest prospect of any gain whatsoever. Oh, we may learn a little about the behaviour of the human body at high altitudes, and possibly medical men may turn our observation to some account for the purposes of aviation. But otherwise nothing will come of it. We shall not bring back a single bit of gold or silver, not a gem, nor any coal or iron. We shall not find a single foot of earth that can be planted with crops to raise

food. It's no use. So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for.”²

² Seattle Times January 16, 2000

Mallory in the pursuit of the mountain; in the pursuit of joyful happiness was confronted with Sheol, with the Pit, with death itself and he succumbed.

The lasting impact of Psalm 30 for the Christian doesn't lie with the Psalmist. Instead it points us to God. God has journeyed with the Psalmist to the point of death and found a way forward from it. 'God with us', Immanuel, is an Old Testament concept that has its fulfilment for the Christian in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus journeys with us to death and has found a way forward from it into life. The one who

could cry from the cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the one who knows the place of Sheol and from it beckons us to know his deliverance. The joy, the real joy today, is that we can hold on to a hope that rests in God’s being, and so we will never be disappointed. May God comfort us all this day. Amen.