

Lent 3  
7/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

### The Silence of God's Creation and the Sweetness of God's Law

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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#### *Introduction*

Our old friend, Professor Howard Wallace, used to remind both faculty and students that the psalms were not just another reading in the menu which the lectionary sets forth. In congregations like ours which regularly sing a psalm, it's easy to think of it as a stepping-stone between the First and the Second Testaments, and to give it little thought.

Please listen again to the Ten Commandments, and to St Paul's wonderful epistle, but today I'm with Howard, and I will stay with the psalm.

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#### *Sermon*

'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.'

(Ps. 19:14)

Many preachers have begun our sermons with that verse, the last in this beautiful and well-loved psalm. But it is more challenging than it seems: on what grounds would I assume that my words might be acceptable to God? Because a **rock** was a safe place, out there, exposed on the mountain before my enemies; the **redeemer** is the kinsman who pays the price of my release from slavery. These are the sinner King David's images of the God on whom he depends for life and liberty.

The text of this familiar psalm in today's service sheet will be new to you; when something is too familiar, it loses its impact, so I hope you may see some new things today. It comes from a new translation made by an official group of the Roman Catholic church, and I find it very fresh.

The psalmist begins by holding up two of the gifts of God, gifts which require a humble and grateful response: God's creation and God's law.

As a boy I used to go out at night into our backyard and look at the stars. In a small town in the Goulburn Valley in the 1940s, you could still see them. I was then - and still am when I manage to escape the urban light - utterly awed by the sight. You feel you are looking through a veil of lights to the infinite depths of space.

Pope Paul VI once began a homily - in French: '*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*'. 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me'. I think it was at the time that the astronauts first tramped on the moon. It's a thought, a *pensée*, of the French philosopher Pascal. The psalmist, however, is not frightened; the sight opens his eyes and ears to the Creator.

‘O burning sun with golden beam/and silver moon with softer gleam’, and ‘fresh-rising morn, in praise rejoice/and light of evening, find a voice’ as the praise of St Francis put it. The psalmist invites us to learn ‘the genius of God’s work’.

It begins with the silence: ‘without a word, without a sound, without a voice being heard, yet their message fills the world, their news reaches its rim’. There will be a Word, as St John reminds us, a word heard and seen and touched by humankind, but the morning light enlightens us and is its herald.

Pope Francis says in his beautiful encyclical *Laudato Sí*, ‘It is [the humble conviction of Christians] that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet’ (#9). To look up is to look down at the earth we stand on, the earth which sustains us, the fragile earth on which everything living depends, and which today is under terminal threat – by us. ‘Day carries the news today, night brings the message to night’, but humankind has not looked or listened.

Of course, we don’t look at the Sun, but we observe its movement, as the psalm says - look beyond the sun to that vast blue dome. It is a magnificent canvas, an open marquee within which the sun makes its daily journey; its edges set the limits of its travel – for the limits of its power and purpose are set by God. The life-giving God launches the sun each day with the boldness of the bridegroom leaping from bed on his wedding day, of ‘an athlete eager to run the race’.

But this is not about stargazing and certainly not about looking at the sun, but as an ancient Mesopotamian poet put it, we are invited to read ‘the silent writing of the heavens.’ We’re also to *feel* it: ‘nothing on earth escapes its heat’. And think how often Jesus looked to the heavens, the waters and the earth for the lessons they taught.

So much for the first half, which may well have begun life as a separate poem, but someone joined it to the next one, the one about the law of God, the *Torah*. Christians might miss how Jews regard the Law unless we have the chance to be present in a synagogue on the Sabbath at the moment when the scroll is taken from the Ark, laid on the shoulder of the happy person honoured to carry it, and the congregation stands and sings – and dances. Everyone crowds to the aisle end of their row, and many reach out to touch it with their prayer shawl as it passes. It is an ecstatic moment.

There is a slight relic of this tradition of our forebears in the procession into church with the Bible, which is intended to be a welcome to God’s Word, to indicate, in good Reformed terms, that everything that follows is a response to that Word. I sometimes wish we were a bit more excited about it!

So now we may join in the paeon of praise the psalmist heaps on God’s law. It ‘revives the soul’, it ‘guides the simple’, it ‘delights the heart and sharpens the vision’. Laws, rules, commandments, all have their uses, for the learned and the simple, when they speak of Good News. That is how Jesus applied the Law. ‘Let the children come’, ‘the sabbath was made for humankind’, ‘this temple I will rebuild in three days’, his answer to the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’, all the parables. Even ‘Take and eat’ is a command. Such laws taste good, ‘richer than honey, sweet from the comb’.

But more: ‘Keeping them makes me rich, they bring me light; yet faults hide within us, forgive me mine’. We have failings we recognize, and we have ‘unwitting sins’, ‘hidden faults’ which we do not see. The writer prays, ‘Keep my pride in check, break its grip’, a direct and clear-minded, honest confession!

But - do Christians have quite such an exalted view of the Law? Let me remind you of what the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* says of the law as the Church uses it:

#17 ...*The aim of such law is to confess God's will for the life of the Church; but since law is received by human beings and framed by them, it is always subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel.*

We have not always held or practised such a godly, Christian understanding of our law, in church or society.

Thomas Cranmer did when he set the Ten Commandments to be read before the confession in his *Book of Common Prayer*:<sup>1</sup> they were meant to bring you to your knees - and we tend to hear them in that way; not so our father John Calvin: he placed them *after* the Confession and after Assurance of Forgiveness, for he saw the commandments as a guide to right living.

And, in any case, if they came from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and are read in his Spirit, these laws are comforting, strengthening, guiding words, bringing order to the chaotic tribes on the edge of the desert, touching every part of community life. We have discovered, in recent decades, as Jews and Christians have begun to talk to each other again, that for both of us, God's law *is* grace.

So, we end where we began, with the psalm's final prayer:

Keep me, thought and word, in your good grace.  
Lord, you are my Saviour. You are my rock.

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<sup>1</sup> In his second, more Reformed attempt, in 1552.