

## A prayer for the church

Why is this Psalm included in the bible? Well, we have said the psalms is the place of blessing, it is the place we find expression for the heights and depth of human experience before God. They are there to help us express ourselves to God. Whether we are the heights of happiness

Psalm 146 vs 1 “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord, O my soul, I will praise the Lord all my life. I will praise my God as long as I live”

and want to just Give thanks to God and tell him how wonderful he is, praise him for his grace and forgiveness

Psalm 103:2

“Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins..”

Or from the depth of affliction

Psalm 102 vs 1-2 “Hear my prayer, O lord; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me in distress...”

What is this psalm here to do. It is here to remind us and help us to express this fact. That as a church we should and are completely dependant on God to effect any significant and lasting change in the church and in

our lives. As Jesus says, 'Apart from me you can do nothing'. Here is the prayer of a churchman whose church has parted company with God and its spiritual life and effectiveness has stagnated and from a much humbled position they must now learn again to be dependant on his grace.

It may not surprise you that I see strong parallels with the church today. Think about this for a minute:

What comes to mind when I mention the Church of Scotland?

121 George St., NPC, Assembly, decline, anything else?

Here are some stats I quickly pulled of the web.

2001 census 68.9% claimed to be Christian in Scotland  
2003 10% population go to church on an average Sunday  
approx 350 people leave the church in Scotland every week  
1995-2003 Church of Scotland attendance down 20%  
1995-2003 Pentecostal churches 11% up (transference)

In general there are a lack of ministers, aging congregations, congregations closing and or amalgamating and remaining vacant for years – for some nearly a decade. Despite valiant sacrificial work by dedicated folks in these set ups they are marked by

steep decline.

By God's grace we in North Parish Church are in a situation of sustained steady growth e.g. next week at the holiday club there are 79 children signed up for the Pyramid Rock holiday club and we are running and under 5 programme for children of the helpers called Pyramid Pebbles which will mean we have a potential for over 100 children attending this event next week – That is a growth of 250% in the last 3 years (praise God). But the picture for the church in general is very poor. The Church is on its chin straps. How do you feel about that? For some here you will remember the church of your younger days. Multiple morning services, massive Sunday schools, people in waiting lists to get into the Boys Brigade, 1 000 000 members in the Church of Scotland alone. For folks like myself I remember being in a sizable Sunday School class to, by the time I was 16, being one of two teenagers in the church. Decline has just been a way of life for the church in many younger peoples experience. Do you feel something in your gut saying I want to see that change? Good, by God's grace, I hope that over the coming weeks and months I hope we will be given the opportunity.

But for this morning let's listen to this guy, Asaph who is praying for the church of his time when it is between a rock and a hard place.

Locating the exact time he is writing is not easy but

there are a few clues in the first couple of verses. He speaks of Joseph (vs 1) and Benjamin (vs 2). At the holiday club next week we are looking together with the children at the story of Joseph (daddies favourite, technicolour coat, dreams, set off to egypt etc). Joseph and Benjamin were sons of the same mother. Joseph had two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh) and so when the 12 tribes of Israel were given their portion of land Josephs was split into two (Ephraim and Manasseh). In 921BC the 12 tribes split into 10 and two. Judah (where Jerusalem was) and Benjamin stated together and formed a southern Kingdom and the others including Ephraim and Manasseh joined to form a northern kingdom. And with the split the descendants of Joseph and Benjamin also split.

hence vs 1 “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock;  
who sits enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth  
before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Awaken your might;  
came and save us.”

It is a low point for the church of his time. It is not the first time the church will split – the free church and the united free church as splits from the church of scotland.

It is a low point a point from which Asaph feels they need saved. Disunited, discouraged, lost, a mere shadow of its former glorious self. Gosh it could be the church today couldn't it? So what is the answer? How

can the church be revived in Asaph's and our time? Is if not THE answer here, is there part of an answer?

At this point we need to ask ourselves this question— am I really interested to see the church grow again? Of course we are not just because we have a strong and positive moral voice which should be heard to help stop the moral decline of our time but more importantly if we understand the teaching of Jesus without him as your saviour and Lord you cannot know God as father and will not get into heaven and what is more be in the only place where God is not – Jesus cannot conceive of anything worse and calls it hell. So church decline is more than just a curious sociological phenomenon to be overcome but a spiritual disaster to be averted!

I guess we may think of decline as a modern phenomenon but it is not. The Old testament is replete with times of real spiritual growth and revival and real low times for the people who thought of themselves as belonging to the family of God. Here is a prayer from the heart from a man whose eyes were I am sure filled with tears when he wrote it.

Return to the King  
Seek his restoration

### **Return to the King**

In ancient times the King was at times referred to the Shepherd of the nation – guiding, tending, protecting,

providing and so on. Though Asaph and the people of God had a King the majority of them were muppets. Asaph looks to the one who should be King over the people of God – the Lord himself.

vs 1 “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel” In other words hear us O King of Kings.

vs 1 “You who sit enthroned between the cherubim”. That is of course a reference to the temple and the access point where God told the people he could be found. The Cherubim were on top of the ark of the covenant which contained the tablets of stone with the ten commandments on them. The mercy seat where forgiveness for sin was found.

What has happened here? Quite simply God has withdrawn his Kingship and left them to their own devices till they come to their senses. Having warned them repeatedly about the consequences of their actions and choices, finally he withdrew. And favour turned to anger and time out on the naughty step for the nation – punishment or judgement!

Now we may balk at the idea of God being angry – a bit fire and brimstone. But of course God gets angry (Ex 34:6 reminds us he is slow to anger) but he does get angry. Do you think he is not angry that 24 000 people die every day from lack of food. Of course he does. Do you not think he gets angry with his people when they, like rebellious teenagers, flout his ways and make a

mockery of him from generation to generation. Twist and contort his gospel to suit whatever the whims and preferences of each generation. Of course he does.

Is the church in the west going down the tubes because of God's displeasure of course it is. In many denominations we have practically turned sin into a virtue. Declaring that which God blatantly calls sin acceptable nowadays and going out of our way it seems to promote it. Materialism, promiscuity both hetro and homosexual, divorce - the divorce rate is higher in the church in America then it is in the wider society!

So I say with Asaph, vs 2 “Awaken you might, come and save us”. Save the church from itself. Somehow we think that if we change what we believe to suit more people then more will come into the church. Well look at the result. The exact opposite is happening, churches are emptying by the truck load!

vs 3 “Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine upon us,  
that we may be saved”

Amen to that!

The picture that comes to mind is of Asaph in the temple on his own. Tears in his eyes for his people – those who knew God's favour now desolate. In vs 4-6 he is saying look at us

Prayers unheard, shamed and mocked

Restore us Of God, make your face shine upon us and we may be saved.

vs 8ff Asaph uses the image of the vine which of course is used all though the Old Testament to represent God's people. He recalls God's faithfulness in taking them out of slavery in Egypt (Under Moses), giving them the land of Canaan (under Joshua) How it grew under the Kingship of David and Solomon. But now...

vs 12 The protecting wall of the vineyard is broken and anyone can enter and pick at the grapes and so on

This is a plea for God to come and be God. To come again and establish a new covenant agreement with the people. To Let him be God over them and for them to follow his ways. To let the people return to the King.

It is interesting that the tune for this psalm is 'The Lilies of the covenant". God's relationship with the church in the Old Testament was based on a covenant agreement the basis of which was the 10 commandments. They stuck to the agreement (sought forgiveness when transgressed) and all hunky dorry but when not and they turned away from him the agreement was broken and they would experience God's withdrawal, which in effect was his judgement. They need to seek his restoration.

## Seek his restoration

Asaph is pleading for the nation the heart and soul of his nation. They need heart and soul restoration. This vine needs restored, protected, tended. Does God hear his prayer. Of course he does.

As the story of the bible unfolds we will hear of a God no longer withdrawn but who is near – with us. Immanuel. As the bible story unfolds we will hear of a New Covenant not just for Israel but available to all in the nations of the earth who will accept it. As the story of the bible progresses we will hear of a vine restored, tended and bearing much fruit. The answer to this prayer squares on Jesus doesn't who name means God saves.

Look at John 15 with me

1"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.  
2He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes<sup>[a]</sup> so that it will be even more fruitful. 3You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit;

apart from me you can do nothing. 6If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command. 15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit —fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.

The task of the church today if it wants restoration is to remain in the vine. Abide, tabernacle in the Lord through faith and trust. As in Asaph's day the church through the ages has lost sight of that but hear the words of Jesus. Remain in me and I will remain in you.

How do we do that?

The Church of Scotland is a reformed denomination – it stems from the reformation of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The ethos of the reformed church is it is always reforming according to the word of God because our history is that we stray from it so we have to reform round the word. All the changes in the church are an attempt to continue to re form us round the word of God so that we can remain in the vine, stick close to the Lord and know him as our Shepherd, our leader, guide, protector, the one who pastors us.

So we are reforming according to the pattern of the early church who focussed on Worship – living to please and glorify God, Fellowship – learning how to be God's family, Discipleship – becoming like Christ in word, thought and action, Ministry – using our the gifts God has given us to serve God and Evangelism – we are made for mission, we have good news to share and we need to share it. Core to these things are the two sunday services, the powerhouse (prayer meeting) and the small group bible studies. These will fuel our worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and evangelism.

Church light a beacon for the nation

Own experience – restoration