

Psalm 122

Littlebourne - 15th May 2022 - Psalm 120

I've recently been reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I'm about halfway through. Most of you are probably familiar with the plot and the world in which it is set. It's this very thought out world, with consistent languages that have been invented by Tolkein; there's a history to the world he's created, it all slots together in a consistent way.

You have these neat parallels and foreshadows, like Frodo's alarm at the ring, which at the beginning of the trilogy he doesn't know is particularly special, being thrown in the fireplace by Gandalf. Frodo is more aghast at the potential loss of the ring, than he really should be, given he doesn't know what it does yet. This of course foreshadows the end of the trilogy, as Frodo struggles to let go in a situation where the fire really would consume the ring. There's two wizards that are sorts of mirrors of each other - Gandalf and Saruman. Two kings, Theoden and Denethor that both start depressed and passive when we meet them in the story - but one takes the good path and one the bad path.

Now a long book with internal consistency and sort of prophetic plotlines is nothing special, considering that it's written by a single author - Tolkein could draft and adjust until he was satisfied it could be published.

We see a similar internal consistency in the Bible. Things happen in the New Testament that turn out to have been prophesied in the Old. Stories in Genesis take on new meaning when we see parallels in Revelation. The Bible of course has many human authors, which makes this quite the feat in human terms. But as Christians, we know that the Bible also has one author, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the words of those human writers. It should be no surprise to us that we see neat parallels throughout scripture, even in those places that are not fiction. Of course the whole creation has one author, God, so the true stories in the Bible are consistent, prophetic and paralleling other events.

We're going to look at some of these sorts of parallels as we examine Psalm 122.

A song of Ascents. Of David.

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

As I mentioned when we looked at the Psalms as a whole, most of the Psalms have a title, that tells us about the author, any musical instructions, or gives information about the context of the Psalm. We're again, looking at a Song of Ascents - one of the fifteen such Psalms, probably named this because they are to be sung on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As pilgrims ascend to Jerusalem, ascend to the temple on its hilltop, these may have been the songs that they sang.

This time, our Psalm is attributed to a specific author - David, the King of Israel. Some 73 of the Psalms are attributed to David (that's just under half of them).

David starts his Psalm with this first stanza:

Stanza 1

*I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
2 Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!*

Jerusalem - a very important place. The first mention of it is in Genesis 14. Abraham goes to Melchizedek, the king of Salem, the place later named Jerusalem. Genesis 14, talking about Abraham:

17 After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). 18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) 19 And he blessed him and said,

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
20 and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"*

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Not just the first instance of Jerusalem, but also the first time we see a priest in the Bible, and it's a priest of God Most High. This too is the first time we see the concept of giving a tithe - a crucial aspect of the priesthood that would minister in Jerusalem, some 1000 years after this.

Abraham later takes his son, Isaac to offer him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2). Mount Moriah is named as the place where Solomon built his temple (2 Chronicles 3:1), that is, in Jerusalem.

We next see Jerusalem when Israel is conquering the land, led by Joshua. Joshua chapter 10 tells us of the defeat of, amongst others, the King of Jerusalem at Joshua's hand. In chapter 18, Jerusalem is listed as allotted to the tribe of Benjamin. Then, during the period of the judges Jerusalem came under the control of the Jebusites and was named Jebus (Judges 19:11 –12).

Jerusalem came back under Israelite control when David had been reigning as King for seven years (2 Samuel 5:5 onwards). David conquers Jerusalem, then reigns there, treating it as his capital, and brings the ark there. Before, the ark was in the house of Abinadab, where it had been since the ark was returned to Israel after its captivity by the Philistines (1 Samuel 5,6,7). David brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), with a brief stop in another house along the way after Uzzah touched the ark and died. David builds a tent for the ark, much like the tabernacle that the ark was in before. Now David wants to build a temple for the ark - he says that "he lives in a house of cedar, why shouldn't the ark?" But Nathan the prophet tells David it is not for him to build this, but for his successor.

Where we are when David writes this, is with the ark residing in a tent in Jerusalem, but the promise of a proper temple to come.

Now when David was invited to join someone in going up to the house of the Lord, he was glad (v1 ESV). He rejoiced with them (v1 NIV). He anticipates standing within the gates of Jerusalem.

David's joy at going to Jerusalem can be witnessed in 2 Samuel 6:12-15, as David brings the ark to Jerusalem:

12 And it was told King David, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. 13 And when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. 14 And David danced before the Lord with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the horn.

Stanza 2

*3 Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
5 There thrones for judgement were set,
the thrones of the house of David.*

David had just conquered Jerusalem - it would not be until his son, Solomon that the temple would be built. But David looks forward to that time and speaks of Jerusalem as a city built, bound firmly together.

Jerusalem is a place of unity for the Israelites. There's the distinctions of many tribes, yet unity of purpose - 'to give thanks to the name of the Lord.'

Going to Jerusalem - or rather the tabernacle or temple specifically - was decreed for Israel, that is, it's part of the Mosaic law. Sacrifices were to be made there, and you'll remember from our time in Mark that many would travel to Jerusalem for festivals, such as passover.

Jerusalem is the place where the people of God meet with God - where they are united in praise to God.

Lastly, there are thrones of judgement and thrones of the house of David - this is a place of justice and royalty. The appointed ruler of God's people, the throne of not just any king, but of David, is here.

Stanza 3

*6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
“May they be secure who love you!
7 Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”
8 For my brothers and companions' sake
I will say, “Peace be within you!”
9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.*

The last stanza turns to prayer. Peace for Jerusalem, security for those within her and those who love her. He seeks the good of Jerusalem because the house of the Lord is there. There's this recurring theme of 'peace'. The name Jerusalem is commonly interpreted to mean the 'city of peace' or 'abode of peace'.

Today

What made Jerusalem special?

Jerusalem is of such importance because it was where the ark rested, where the temple was built around it. It's where Israel would go to worship God, where God dwelt among them, where they offered sacrifices and sought God's help and forgiveness. They had priests to mediate between themselves and God. Their way to God was found in Jerusalem.

Christ foretold

Jerusalem doesn't really feature any more for us though, does it. Some of us might have visited Jerusalem, but hopefully nobody here thinks we need to go there to find God. Our way to God rests elsewhere.

If the special thing about Jerusalem was specifically the temple and the associated sacrifices and priests, why do we not need a temple or tabernacle or priests or sacrifices? Because we have something, rather someone, better. Remember in Mark 14, Jesus is accused of saying that he "will destroy the temple and in three days will build another that is not made by hands". Hebrews 9:11-12:

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

We do not approach God through sacrifices for our sin, but through the one sacrifice that paid for all our sin, once and for all. We don't go to a physical location to seek God's presence, but God, the Holy Spirit dwells in us all.

Hebrews chapters 8-10 tell us about how Jesus Christ fulfils the aims of the temple and priesthood and sacrifices and how he accomplishes those aims perfectly and eternally. The Old Testament system foreshadows the new.

I mentioned that Jerusalem was first seen in the Bible as the place Melchizedek was from, foreshadowing the coming priesthood in Jerusalem. The writer of Hebrews points out, in chapter 7, that Melchizedek also foreshadows Christ - Psalm 110, which the writer of Hebrews quotes and says is talking about Christ, says (Psalm 110:4b):

You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.

As we saw, Melchizedek wasn't just priest from Jerusalem, but a priest who ministered with bread and wine - sounds very Christ-like.

Forever

All the laws and customs, the sacrifices and priesthood and temple, all the Old Testament things, point us towards Christ. There are symbols that point us towards Jesus in all these things that the Israelites were commanded to do.

A common misconception is that Old Testament Israel was saved by doing things - following the law. But the New Testament makes clear that this is not the case - it's not by following the customs, visiting the physical temple or offering our own sacrifices that we are saved. Hebrews again, start of chapter 10:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to tell us that it's Christ who offers the true sacrifice:

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ[b] had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Those who were saved in the Old Testament were saved just the same we people are saved today - through faith, by grace. No amount of law-keeping will save us. Paul writes in Romans 3:20:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The customs of ancient Israel were but shadows of what was to come - they showed the people their sinfulness and illustrated for them the great cost of their sin in all the unending sacrifices demanded. But it was always and eternally only through Christ that anyone is saved.

If we look at the Old Testament law alone, if we just take the rules and regulations, we would expect David to be terrified to go to the house of the Lord. He would find there a terrifyingly holy God, who demands sacrifice and is totally unapproachable. Would David rejoice at the prospect of this?

But David rejoices as he is invited to visit the house of the Lord, because presumably he understands that he worships one who is more than just a demanding God of sacrifice - in some way, he has faith that God saves apart from the sacrifices and the following of the law. His salvation is found in Christ, though he might not be able to articulate it in those terms. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New.

Christ is our Jerusalem

So Christ is our Jerusalem - the things that made city special are found in Him. So going through the Psalm again, what does this Psalm tell us about how we should live, we who now look to Christ, rather than this shadow of Christ, the temple and Jerusalem?

Stanza 1

First, we should rejoice in going to meet Christ - it's a joyful occasion. We are to go to Him - there is some sense of obligation, just as there was for Israel, to go to God in worship. But like David, we can rejoice in this, it is not a hardship, but a joy.

He is the heart and purpose of the church, He is the centre of all our worship and devotion. As Jerusalem was the centre of all religious activity, all worship and prayer and praise, we should place Christ at the centre of all that we do in worship and prayer and all activities.

Stanza 2

Next, we should recognise that Christ is that which unites us. Just as the Israelite tribes would go to Jerusalem to celebrate together, so it is in Christ that we are all joined together.

Here in this chapel, we are different people, worshipping in a different style to what we do in St Andrew's in the morning, different still from those in St Vincent's down the road, different still from what goes on in Daniel's church in Kenya. But what unites Christians worldwide, regardless of our many differences, is our union with Christ - what joins us all together is that we are united to Christ.

Stanza 3

Lastly, it's in Christ that we find our security and peace.

Psalm 48 starts like this:

*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, 2 beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
3 Within her citadels God
has made himself known as a fortress.*

God is like a fortress, unassailable. When we find ourselves in Christ, the cornerstone, the solid rock, we find that security, just as the Israelites found security within the walls of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

So it's Christ that for us is like Jerusalem, the city where the Israelites travelled to meet with God, find unity together, and find security in its walls. This Psalm for us today, calls us to go to Christ to find this peace, unity and security, and to go with rejoicing.

Near the end of Revelation, we see the new Jerusalem - the city where God and his people dwell. This new Jerusalem is described as being like 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' - it's the bride of Christ, the church dwelling with Christ, with no separation. At its centre is no longer a temple built with human hands, but Christ on his throne, from which the river of living water flows.

We are like those who would have sung these Songs of Ascent, thousands of years ago, on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem - but we are heading for a Jerusalem far greater, and in many respects we find ourselves already there.