
³ Restore us, O God; let Your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let Your face shine, that we may be saved.

¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let Your face shine, that we may be saved.

From Psalm 80 (NRSV)

A young mother is home alone with her new-born child. She is excited at the birth of her new-born son. But as her body adjusts again to life without another body inside, she has an overwhelming sense of fear and inadequacy. “How will I cope? Do I really love this child?” she asks herself. An older man is at home in his shed. He has been made redundant by his workplace due to COVID-led circumstances. He has applied for many positions, but the more he applies he feels that potential employers are becoming less receptive. “Do I have any value and worth? He asks himself. An elderly widower, whose children live in various countries overseas, has received a cancer diagnosis. Due to frail health, his social outings are limited. He feels all alone. “Does anyone really care about me?” he asks. A young couple who have been living together for many years, and only recently married, have seen their conflicts escalate. They thought that ‘married life’ would ‘improve their relationship’. But they each feel as though maybe their relationship won’t work. “Is it really worth the effort? Do they really love me?” they each ask.

We could all give several examples of situations similar to these. You may well-know people experience hardship and need, people experiencing self-doubt and despair and depression, people facing difficult circumstances. Anyone who is truly engaged with life in its proper meaning will also encounter people experiencing trial and trouble and challenging circumstances. And when we ourselves, or people around us face challenging circumstances, we all cry out in one way or another for ‘someone to help us’. This cry may be to actual persons or the many resources available to us in this land. Or we may simply yell at the stars and plead for someone like God to help us.

What does it mean to ‘be saved’? Each of us can bring a response to this question. Everyone has challenging circumstances to deal with. If you love people, and actually care for people, you will know this need.

In our Psalm for today (Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19) the Psalmist cries out again and again, “Restore us, O God; let Your face shine, that we may be saved.”

You don’t need me to tell you that this Sunday (29th December, 2020) we are beginning again the season of ‘Advent’. ‘Advent’ means we are waiting for something (as the word ‘advent itself implies). And, as our Bible Readings for this day remind us again, this is a time of serious reflection on our lives, as also the actual circumstances of our world in which we live. This is not a time to

pretend there aren't problems and challenges in the world. Indeed, it is the very opposite. This is a season in which we ask "how long," as a sign of our deep yearning for God's to be with us. And each time we ask this question, we voice our faith, and join God's people throughout the ages who have longed for God's presence.

This is the setting for both of our texts today, which begin on a more sober note than the twinkling lights, tinsel, and Christmas parades. Psalm 80 and Isaiah 64 voice serious lament and anxiety about the state of the world. With this, Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair. We are called to be realistic about the world in which we live. Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves, have come to nothing. We have not realised at the deepest level of our being that we cannot save ourselves and that, apart from the intervention of God, we are totally lost.

As we light our First Advent Candle this Sunday (traditionally the 'Hope' candle) we are specifically recalling the hope of the prophets. And their words of 'hope' are expressed in times of trial and trouble. Their words of 'hope' are about real people, who have real problems, wondering what the future holds. They are not calling people to some 'happy escapism' that seeks to deny or minimise the trials and troubles of this world. Rather, they are calling on people to be truly honest about their own lives, and the trials and troubles of those around them.

How long? How long? We cry out to God, over and over again, how long? And then, as the Psalmist does three times, we ask for God to deliver us from the state that we are in. "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." It is a call for a blessing, a longing to receive something only God can offer. It echoes the Aaronic priestly blessing from Numbers 6:22-27, "may the face of God shine upon you" in ways that are only possible for those who are in the presence of God.

Restore us, O God... (v. 3); Restore us, O God of hosts... (v. 7); Restore us, O LORD God of hosts... (v. 19). This building up of intensity has the effect of turning up the volume on and urgency of the people's desperate cry for help.

For people of faith, Psalm 80 is one of those beautiful Psalms in the Bible. Psalm 80 deserves its place as one of the great messianic psalms. If you are experiencing difficult times, or your heart genuinely goes out to other people in need, then this is the Psalm for you. And there are four key images which are used in this Psalm to describe God's saving love for His people. These are the picture of "Shepherd", "Vine", "Son of Man at your Right Hand", and the "Face" of God.

The Psalm opens with the beautiful picture of God as the "shepherd of Israel" who leads His people "like a flock." This is an amazing image which is unusual since much of the imagery of God in the Old Testament pictures God enthroned or His voice thundering over Mount Sinai. Here, we see a

tenderness and intimacy which finds its greatest fulfilment in Jesus who declares, “I am the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). There is no greater sign of God as shepherd than Jesus laying down His life for us and leading us from the barrenness of our sinful wilderness to the green pastures of new life in Him.

Psalm 80 also invokes the imagery of the vine. In the Psalm, the vine represents Israel which has been nourished by God. He brought the vine out of Egypt (vs. 8), and he planted it in a land where it could grow and flourish. Yet, the vine has been cut down and ravaged and burned through Israel’s disobedience. The Old Testament first embraces the idea that although Israel has sinned, there was a remnant who followed the Lord. However, gradually, the remnant became smaller until no one was left. There was none who were found faithful. It is another picture of the predicament we are in apart from God’s intervention. Finally, Jesus came into the world. He fully embodied Israel. He alone is the true and only Israelite who kept the covenant and loved God with all His heart and mind. It is as the true Israelite that He declares, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). There is no hope for fruitfulness unless we, the branches, abide in Him. He alone is the source of our nourishment and life.

Psalm 80 goes on to hint at this great messianic hope when it declares that in the face of Israel’s tragic, lamentable state, their hope is that God would “rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself” (Psalm 80:17). Even the great kings of Israel who represented God’s “right hand” in the world, failed. It would be great David’s greater Son, Jesus Christ, who would stand as God’s man at His right hand, the “Son of Man” who would represent all of humanity in the incarnation. He becomes God’s great victor who exercises God’s kingly rule in the world.

Finally, Psalm 80 has a beautiful, reoccurring refrain which comes with slight variations in verses 3, 7 and 19. The one common thread in these refrains is the phrase “make your face to shine upon us.” You will immediately recall that this is drawn from that famous Aaronic prayer of blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.” God coming to us in Christ Jesus (the “incarnation”) is that great ‘place’ which ties heaven and earth together. It is in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, It is here in the birth of Jesus that we truly and definitively see the “face of God” shining upon us.

In this Psalm there is a repeating phrase, “Restore us, O God.” At the heart of this word ‘Restore’ is the word to ‘turn’ which is also translated as ‘repent’. Normally in the Bible the word ‘repent’ is applied to human beings; we’re called to turn away from our sins and turn back to God. This is true, and very important for each of us. But we also know that in the Old Testament this word used for ‘repentance’ is also used for God; God is said to change His mind and repent of His anger toward His people. That’s what the people of God are

praying for here. “God, Your face is turned away from us. Won’t You turn back to us?” This ties in with the phrase that’s used in the second half of the three refrains: ‘Show the light of your face, and we shall be saved’. We might paraphrase this as “God, won’t You smile on us again?” Our ‘turning to God’ (repentance’) is done so in the knowledge that in Christ Jesus, God has ‘turned to us’ with His ‘face’ of love.

Sometimes you might go to a close friend and ask “How are you?” and they reply, “Well, I’ve had better days”. We can all identify with that in one way or another. There are times when God seems a long way away from us. We go through financial struggles and problems at work – maybe even loss of a job and a livelihood. Many of us are feeling the effects of advancing age. We go through debilitating illness. We lose people we love. We have worries about our kids and our grandchildren. We go through family conflict and heartache. Yes – ‘we’ve seen better days’.

But this Psalm (Psalm 80) calls us to turn – or, to be more accurate, it calls us to ask God to help us turn. We know that often we get distracted by too many things, and sometimes our lives are consumed by stuff that’s got nothing to do with loving God and loving our neighbour. So we ask God to help us turn from that, and turn back to God. It is a time to look to Jesus. He’s the human face of God.

Indeed, the Lord has been favourable to us, far more than we deserve. In Christ, we can say: “You forgave the iniquity of Your people; You covered all their sin. You withdrew all Your wrath.” We have peace with God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In Christ, it can be truly said: “Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky.” Christ is our righteousness, Christ is our peace! “The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.”

The Lord has done great things for us, and He will do them again! God has restored us already, and He will restore us again! Just as the people of Judah were restored when they returned from captivity, so they needed to be restored again when they faced what was ahead of them. So it is for us. We have been redeemed, restored, forgiven; restored back to God through the cross of Christ. As we begin the countdown to Christmas, may we each be blessed with the love of God and the grace of Christ, as well as the favour of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Amen.