

Psalm 29                      For Our Blessedness  
May 26, 2024

“Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;  
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.”

From time to time this text, which is the first verse of the 29th Psalm, will serve as our offertory text, sitting in finer print in the order of service just beneath the line that says, “Giving our Tithes.”

In this context, it means that the giving of our tithes and offerings is a way of praising God, that attributing glory to God is in a way the giving of an offering.

In the context of the psalm there is something different happening. All God’s faithful are being asked to acknowledge God’s majesty and power, the magnificence of God’s grace. That is what the psalm is about. We acknowledge that which is bigger than we are.

The first thing, however, that one notices in this great poetic hymn, is the addressee, “to the mighty.” The writer of this psalm, under the direction of the Spirit, addresses literally, the sons of God, sometimes thought of as the angels in heaven, the mighty ones, and encourages them to make a theological attribution as necessary for their peace and well-being. He tells them to worship from the heart the one who is more powerful than they are.

I don’t know about the angels in heaven, but this lesson is difficult for human beings; the lesson that acknowledging God’s might and power and giving glory to God is an indispensable part of human character development and well-being; that being reminded of our limitations and nurturing humility, are necessary not only in some spiritual sense, but for the health of the world, and for our blessedness, now and in the hereafter.

A few years back when I traveled west to see California for the first, and what could turn out to be the only time, I had the opportunity to attend Sunday worship in two Episcopal churches, for I visited with both of my sisters, one Sunday, and then the next, and they are both Episcopalians.

The first was in Santa Barbara. The walls of the 70s ish modern building were lined with surfboards. The altar area had been transformed into a stage for a jazz band that played before and after, as well as in the service. There was a play area in the rear for the children and some of the people went there to dance to the music. The priest donned a clerical collar along with blue jeans.

The next week I was back in St. Louis at the other sister’s church; The Church of St. Michael and St. George. The architecture and everything else could be found in England itself. Even the priest who led the service was from England. They used the highest liturgy right down to the Elizabethan English of the King James Version of the bible and Shakespeare.

I could not help but feel the difference between the California version and the full on English experience. And, of course, both were very different from any other worship that I have ever experienced.

At one point, when the time came for the confession of sin and prayer, everybody in the service knelt down, and the officiant moved to the side so that attention was directed at the altar. One half of a page in the order of service comprised a prayer of confession which the entire congregation recited together. We read these words:

“Almighty God,  
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
maker of all things, judge of all men.

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time-to-time have grievously committed, by thought, word, and deed, against Thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.

We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembering of them is grievous to us, the burden of them is intolerable.

Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father, for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life, to the honor and glory of the Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.”

While I was kneeling and facing the altar with the priest out of the way, and not really knowing the history of this prayer, a thought came to mind. It occurred to me that in the days of the British Empire, upon which, as they say, the sun never set, the churches of the Anglican Confession would meet in their hour all over the world, and the administrators of the empire, the governing officials, the military officers, the business people, would, at least as an example, if not because of sincere faith, appear for the service at the parish in whatever place they happened to be.

These were the mighty people of their time; the one's imbued with wealth and power. Might this psalm be addressed to them? What can the church say to the most powerful people in the world?

Even if it seems only a little thing, it makes sense that in this liturgy of confession, when the priest steps aside, asks the congregation to kneel before the altar of the Lord and confess their sins, and ask for forgiveness, that it is for their blessedness and health. At the very least it may serve as a reminder of their human frailty, in spite of their high place in the earthly scheme of things.

I wonder if the psalm itself has this in mind, for the psalm goes on to present the Lord as the master of nature, with peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, who breaks the cedars and shakes the deserts, who twists the oaks and strips the forest bare. Not only the mighty in heaven and but also those on earth, is overtaken and shouts, “glory.”

“The *Lord* sits enthroned over the flood, the *Lord* is enthroned as king forever.”

It is the great temptation of every person in every age to think more highly of themselves than they ought, and the temptation of every nation to have a greater confidence in what people working together can accomplish than even a cursory examination of the evidence warrants.

Here even the mighty ones in heaven are instructed to worship the only almighty God, “in the splendor of his holiness.”

One of the academic phrases that describes modern people and the way they live regards the, “human mastery over nature.” We have channeled the rivers so that they stay within their banks, built homes and buildings that reach to the sky and keep us warm in the winter and cool in the summer (Manhattanhenge); we have conquered the challenges of instantaneous global communication and have flown around the world in a day. We have machines that can do much of our working and thinking for us.

Even the modest among us, “the middle,” fancy themselves the, “master of their own lives,” although we probably don’t say it that way. We deceive ourselves into believing that we are in control . . . we *ourselves* are the mighty ones to whom this psalm is addressed?

But it is an illusion. The messes we have made, the imperfect way we organize our relationships with our neighbors, the disastrous situations in which we often find ourselves, the overwhelming problems we face that seem to defy solution, testify that we, like the sons of God addressed in the psalm do well to kneel down in humility and confess our limitations and our weakness and our sins . . . and attribute to *the Lord* the glory due his name.

So let us not forget, on this Memorial Day weekend and Trinity Sunday, that our obligation is not to creation but to the creator; not to the flesh but to the Spirit, not to the material world but to heaven, for it is only in the sense of being led by the Spirit that we are sons of God, as we learn from the epistle text, that only by acknowledging the power and strength of God and by giving God glory, that are minds are situated for reality, and that we ourselves receive peace and strength from God.

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From a reading of the theologian Karl Barth I ran across a prayer that I thought was appropriate and would like to leave it to you as the closing words of these reflections. From Church Dogmatics, vol. 2 part 2 ch. 6, p 695:

Standing:

O mighty and majestic God, when the angels and all the blessed in heaven praise, grant us then in our poverty, the grace to worship Thee in righteousness on earth and to serve Thee according to Thy good pleasure.

May we stand in Thy holy house in true reverence and a heavenly mind, and in faith adore Thy glory. Lift up our thoughts and desires unto Thyself. Sanctify our worship; bless our service and may the praise of our lips be pleasing unto Thee.

Hearken to our prayers before the throne of Thy mercy, and bestow upon us, in Thy grace, all things necessary for our blessedness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.