

**Psalm 80**  
**Prayer for the Family?**  
**Notes for a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

How do you feel when you hear about a bunch of Christians who are not doing very well?

When you hear about a housegroup in our church which is struggling, perhaps failing to get good Bible studies going or perhaps some people in the group not getting on very well?

I imagine, I hope, that most of us feel compassion for those people. We might have a particular perspective. We might agree with one side more than the other. But I think most of us would be moved to prayer and whatever action we could take in that situation.

But what about a church we hear about, as we hear about churches all the time, which is dying? Not because it is unfaithful to the gospel but, perhaps, because it has failed to engage with the culture. A church which is emptying because the people are not willing to change their expression of Christianity in order for new people to be willing to come along and find out what it's all about? That church might be, formally, in some sort of partnership with us through the FIEC that we are part of. How do we feel about them? Well, if you're anything like me you probably do feel sad about that situation. And you want it to change. And you want to pray for them. But you also feel pretty cross with them. Because, often at least, it can seem so obvious what needs to change but these lovely Christian brothers and sisters are unwilling to make that change. And that's really annoying.

Or what about the churches of the Church of England? A denomination where some churches are amongst the most theologically faithful and evangelistically active in the country. Where the Bible teaching can be brilliant... But where other churches are utterly hopeless and where some of the ordained ministers publically speak of their lack of belief in the very existence of God. How do we feel that, year after year, attendance is falling by around 2% in the church of England so that in 25 years time if the trend continues less than 1% of the population will be in a C of E church on a Sunday?

Well I have to confess that, for the most part, such statistics just make me think "it serves them right." After all if you're going to stop believing in God you should at least have the courage to be a proper atheist rather than an ordained minister of the church!

I do feel for my friends who are great Christian men and women but are in that church – but I don't feel that much because I can't help thinking they should just leave!

Or what about the Roman Catholic Church? Or if you're Lisa heading off to Russian, the Orthodox churches? Churches where the official teachings of the church are so completely off beam that they cannot really be called Christian in any meaningful sense. Churches where the leaders deny the wonderful truth that we are made right by faith in Christ alone and that nothing we do, before or after, contributes in any way to our receiving of grace from God.

Churches where, although there are many individuals with a simple trust in Christ, despite what they are taught, the whole structure of what they do obscures the good news about Jesus and prevents people from really understanding who he is and what he has done? How do you feel about those churches?

Well if you're anything like me you don't really think about them much at all and when you do it's not with much compassion and concern.

But I have been rebuked in my attitudes by Psalm 80. And I think that, as we look at its verses now, God's design for this Psalm is that it should increase our compassion and prayer for those who have aligned themselves in some way with being part of a Christian church but who are believing or living in a way that is far from God's design...

It's around 722BC. In Jerusalem the men who sing in the temple are presented with a new song by their leader. A song that teaches them four things about the people of God.

The people of God...

**1 ...need God's salvation (v1-3)**

I imagine the singers nodded with approval as they sang the first line – Hear us O shepherd of Israel.

But then their faces may have grown questioning. God who leads Joseph? God to shine forth between Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh? Hang on a minute. Those are only four of the 12 tribes of Israel. And those four men are the ones of whom Rachel was the mother.

And three of them are in the North of Israel! They are the people who have been persecuting us in the South for the last 200 years. There are the tribes who have gone off and set up different temples. Who are worshipping images of animals! These are the tribes who have been led by Jezebel who persecuted the prophets and killed anyone who remained faithful to the Lord.

How come we're praying for them? And how, Asaph, can you identify us with them? "make your face shine upon us" We're not like them. We're sound. We're faithful. We're keeping the temple going, offering the true sacrifices, singing biblical songs. And they're... well they're just not with us any more!

Well maybe that's not exactly what happened. But that must have been something like the reaction of the people of Judah as they heard this Psalm for the first time.

But Asaph knew that he had to pray for those fallen tribes in the North. He knew perfectly well that they had rejected God's word. He saw all too clearly that they had wicked leaders. He was aware of the fact that they had persecuted believers.

And yet as these people faced their doom with the invasion of the mighty Assyrian army he was moved with compassion to pray for them.

Not because he was weak and sentimental – but because he knew that God himself was concerned about them.

He knew that all of the tribes, all twelve of them, not just the two who remained in the south of the land, were God's treasured possession.

And he saw from the desperate situation of the northern tribes that they had no hope without God acting in salvation.

And despite all the differences between them. Despite the fact that he was faithful to the Bible and they were not. Despite the fact that he was trusting God and they were not. He still saw that, essentially, he and they were just the same. He saw that there is no hope and no rescue without the mighty power of God acting in salvation.

One of the things that is best for us in our Christian life is to look round at those who call themselves Christian and who we sometimes despise and to say to ourselves – you know what they need God's salvation. And so do I.

And to recognize that what we need to pray for others is exactly the same thing that we need to pray for ourselves.

God's people need his salvation. Because God's people...

## **2 ...face God's anger (v4-7)**

There are, it seems, some people – not just Asaph, who have remained faithful to God in the midst of all this decline – just as, no doubt, there are in almost every church and denomination today, even if there are very few of them.

Asaph appeals to God on behalf of those who are faithful. He asks God to start answering their prayers.

He asks God to see that those people have cried buckets-full of tears over the terrible decline of their church.

He pleads with God because the people of God have become a bone of contention to their enemies – people fight over them and try and pick from the spoils.

Asaph doesn't pretend that the reason the people of the north are suffering is just random accident. He acknowledges that their decline is God's doing. He knows that the tears they have cried are justified because of their sin and rebellion.

He is aware that God's anger against them is deserved and right and just. And it is exactly because of that that they do desperately need God's rescue! He, v7, is God Almighty – the one with all power.

The people need God's face to be turned towards them in blessing – his face shining upon them – rather than, at present, with his face turned away from them in judgment.

God's people need God's salvation. They are facing God's anger. And that is all the more tragic because in the past they...

## **3 ...have known his blessing (v8-14a)**

The churches that make up the United Reformed Church in this country were originally set up to promote biblical beliefs about God's sovereignty, the cross and the scriptures without the corruption due to money that was at that time so common in the Anglican church.

These churches and chapels of the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists were everywhere and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century hundreds of thousands were taught the message of Jesus in these churches. Perhaps some people here today come from a URC background.

But in the last 10 years attendance in the URC has declined an astonishing 48%.

Why? Well there are, no doubt, all sorts of reasons. But I am absolutely convinced that the main one is that the denomination as a whole has walked away from the Bible's message about Jesus as our saviour through his cross.

And it's particularly tragic because there is such great history there. How much more must that have been the case for Asaph as he looked at the people of Israel in his own day?

The tribes from the North that were now in decline were part of the company that came out of Egypt. They were a branch in the vine that God himself planted in the land of Israel as he miraculously helped them conquer it.

They were, v10, those who gave shade, protection, to the land. Their presence cultivating the country God had given them was a blessing to that country and, under Kings David and Solomon, v11, it extended its boundaries from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. They had a great history.

But now, v12, it's like a tumbledown garden. Like those great houses you occasionally see, unrescued by the National Trust, where the weeds are growing, the panes in the greenhouses are smashed and the walls are crumbling. A sad relic of former glory where kids roam and wild creatures are the only residents.

No church or denomination today is like a tribe of ancient Israel. They were a specific divine gift – and our groupings are merely human inventions. They had specific promises made to them about their part in God's plans – we have promises that are not for our church but for all of God's people, those who trust in Jesus.

But despite the differences, and they are very important, I think we need to see a similarity too. They were God's people. Not every individual one of them – many of them never believed. But they were, collectively, people who identified themselves with God. They had started out being led by men who experienced God's grace despite their sin and were blessed by him.

That's how it is with so many of the churches and Christian groups in our country that have fallen into decline. And it is utterly tragic that that has happened. It is heart breaking that despite all that great history it can all come to judgment and destruction when people turn away from the message of Jesus.

I'm sure Asaph was angry with the leaders of northern Israel for what they had done. I'm sure he thought it was wicked and wrong. But he wasn't going to stop with being angry. He wasn't going to condemn them and leave them to their fate.

He was moved to pray for them. His response to such terrible judgment, even on those he knew deserved it, was to plead with God, v14, "return to us, O God Almighty!"

Is that how we pray? For individual Christians who have wandered off into sin or error? For declining churches in our city? Even for great denominations who have started well but turned aside into heresy and face judgment?

If you're like me I suspect you don't. Because I know that very often I have not the insight to see that I see God's rescue just as much as anyone else.

I do not pray for others – because I am proud myself. But if I only would, if we only would, well there would be great hope. Because God's people...

#### **4 ...can have life through the Son (v14b-19)**

Asaph continues his metaphor describing God's people as the vine. And the "son" in v15, is, initially, just a way of describing an offshoot of the vine – a little twig that sprouts by itself.

The right hand in v15 is simply a way of saying that God worked in mighty power to establish Israel as his people in the land.

But then Asaph goes further – grasping after something wonderfully true but which he cannot yet fully understand. In v17 he sees that the answer to Israel's turning aside from God and the terrible judgment they face is to be found in a man who sits at God's right hand. He sees that it is in a son that there is hope for Israel.

He didn't see in fullness what that meant. Perhaps he understood that in time there would be a king descended from David who would reunite and restore the people of Israel. Well he wasn't wrong there.

It seems, v18, that he saw that without this saviour, this man of God's right hand, that there would always be a terrible cycle of coming to God and walking away again. That it is in him alone that there is life without turning back. And he wasn't wrong there either.

But 800 years later there was so much more than that as well. Because the one who came wasn't just God's right hand man. He was the shepherd. God himself come to lead his people.

And he wasn't just a shoot of the vine – he was the true vine. The perfect man. The one who can protect all who come in faith to him and incorporate them into his fruitful family tree.

People, God's people, can be rescued as we come to the Son and put our hope in him. That is where God's face of blessing is turned. That is where there is fruitfulness. It is in Jesus Christ that we find the true hope of restoration for all.

So what does that all mean for us in our relations with others who see themselves as Christian, even if we see them as flawed and fallen?

Well I think there are a number of implications...

The first one, and this is particularly appropriate today as we commission Lisa, is that even "Christian" countries need evangelising! There are many countries which many have many churches but where people still need to hear about the real Jesus, the son who can give us life.

And when we go to those countries, where many people are nominally Christian, we should do so recognising that some of them genuinely are already believers. And that we will meet people who love Christ and want to honour him and that we need to help them not to patronise them.

We should see that however angry we may feel with so-called Christian leaders who have taken their people astray, we must also plead with God that he would have mercy on people and bring restoration through the son.

The other thing we must do is recognise that Jesus is already doing this work. Right from the beginning of his ministry Jesus shared the good news about himself with the Samaritans – the descendents of the inhabitants of northern Israel.

The Samaritan woman at the well that John wrote about in his gospel was one of the first believers in Jesus. Samaritans were the first people outside the

immediate vicinity of Jerusalem to believe the message about the resurrection.

Jesus is into bringing people to know him from corrupt forms of Christian religion. He's been doing it for 2,000 years.

He didn't do it by trying to reinstate the 10 lost tribes of Israel. And we won't do it by trying to change the beliefs of the Roman Catholic church or the holders of power in the Church of England.

He did it in exactly the same way we can do it – by telling people involved in corrupt religions about him.

Isn't that encouraging? What do your religious friends need? They need you to keep on telling them about Jesus! If they are not converted – tell them about Jesus. If they are Christians who don't understand some things very well – tell them about Jesus. If you're not even sure whether they are Christians or not... guess what? Tell them about Jesus.

He is the son of man who gives life.

So we should pray to him for Christians we fear are not doing very well. And we should talk about him to Christians who are not doing very well.

Because it is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that any of us, can have life.

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