

February 18, 2018 Absolutely Central Psalm 103

First of all, a story from my youth. Television came to Port Arthur in the summer of 1959. It was the summer before I started High School. Television came to my home 10 days before the school year began. Roy Rogers had a t.v. program. He and Dale Evans always caught the bad guy, and they always managed to find a way to witness to their faith as Christians. It sticks in my mind like it was yesterday. Roy Rogers teaching the bad guy who is now behind bars how to find the book of Psalms in the Bible...find the approximate middle....crack it open...voila...The Book of Psalms. In those days a Bible was a Bible. No additional 1 to 200 pages of notes, and a concordance. To this day, that is how I find the Book of Psalms.

I always read when I go to bed. Most of the time I read novels. I am currently reading "Home To Holly Springs." It is the first in a series called the "Mitford Novels." The lead character is an Anglican priest. He's retired and he has taken a trip from Mitford North Carolina to Holly Springs Mississippi, where he was born and raised. Every street, every building, every person he meets after being away for 40 years, leads to a flash back memory of his boyhood days in this community. It is always surprising where you find, or discover something you never knew before.

On page 196 Father Kavanaugh remembers the day the Anglican Curate said to his father, "Matthew, this son of yours is very special." His father is unconvinced. The Curate begins quizzing the son who is about 12 years old. "How many books in the Bible?" 66 says the boy. "How many in the Old Testament?" 39 says the boy. "How many in the New?" 27 says the boy. " And what verse is at the centre of the Bible?" Psalm 103 verses 1 and 2 comes the reply. "Could you recite those verses for us?" Bless the Lord O my soul, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. "Very special," says the Curate. "Useless information," snarls his father.

I am with the fictitious Curate. How remarkable. In the centre of the centre book of the Bible...these precious words. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." I knew the words were there. I have sung them with you and our choir under Sherry's direction. But I never realized they were at the absolute centre of this holy book. And I learned that reading a novel for simple entertainment.

This is really important stuff. Dare I say, basic stuff, central stuff, when we take the faith that the Bible fosters, faith in Jesus the Christ, seriously. It opens and in one half of the first sentence it says several things at once. Our current translation uses the words "Praise the Lord, O my soul." In one burst of words, in one shot it affirms the existence of God, that we know that God is real viscerally, deep down in the centre of our being, that we have a need to utter HIS praise. That we are not only physical in nature, but as men and women and young people, we are spiritual in nature as well, made in HIS image.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul. It is profound. And it is revealing. Praising God is good for us. Remember the lesson in school about good. Good, better, best. The comparative forms adjective. When I say praising God is good for me, I fail to describe and even to see, just how good for me that activity is. I think it is good for me. It is probably the best thing I can do in any given moment, in any given circumstance. It is the best thing I can do. There is nothing better. Why? Because when I praise God, I bless God. This is what we made for, to sing praise to God, to praise God with our tongues, to worship HIM.

And it is true, it is a spiritual exercise. Best done by our spirits, our souls. About 10 years ago...they did a remake of the classic black and white film "King Kong." The big gorilla, the beautiful girl, the Empire State Building in New York. It's a little detail. But when they kill Kong, the sparkle of light goes out in his eyes. It is an emotional trick the film trade uses to send the message the person on screen...man, woman, child...has died. It is an acknowledgement at a basic level that we are more than just a physical carcass. When the light goes out, there is nobody home. The soul has departed. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul: all my inmost being," all that is within me says the KJV, bless or praise HIS holy name.

Having acknowledged that we are spiritual in nature the Psalm writer immediately goes beyond that to acknowledge we are not just spiritual in nature. "All that is within me." My inmost being...heart, lungs, muscle, bone, brain, nervous system, blood vessels, everything under my skin.... "bless HIS holy name." I say again, this is profound. In the movie "Chariots of Fire," celebrating the Scot Eric Liddle as a member of the Olympic team from Britain in 1924, Eric says to his sister who has difficulties with his commitment to sport; he says, "God made me fast. And when I run I feel HIS pleasure." Eric Liddle got it right. As believers our praising God should so much more than just the repeating of words with a musical accompaniment. As important as that exercise is, our praise of God ought also to be in our standing up, in the way we walk, and the way we act, the way we run, the way we live. One hundred percent of what we are. You may remember Eric Liddle died in China when the communists took over that nation...a Christian martyr. "All that is within me, praise HIS holy name."

"Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Every time we come to the Lord's table, we are reminded in the celebration of that sacrament that it is a central element of Christian faith, to remember what God has done for us. He gave His Son that we might not perish, but have everlasting life. But it is so much more than that. It was as a result of my pursuit of God and faith, that I met Barbara. He gave me my life partner. He gave me as life partner to her. All the near misses...moments when seconds made the difference between and life and death, and I'm still here. Light still sparkles in my eyes. Because God preserved me for reasons I do not even grasp. Moments in which HE has privileged me to touch the lives of others and there is no question, I often did not know how important it was.

I have a Bible that I use and read at least once a week. In an attempt to make it last longer I long ago put one of those vinyl slip covers. I tend to stuff stuff in that cover. Last week I cleaned it out and I found a note. It was in the form of a page torn from a little devotional

book. Immersed in the text was a 4 line verse. It was underlined. A hand written note in the margin testifies, "This is what you have done for me." The person signed the note. I really thought no one was watching, or listening, or noticing. Forget not all God's benefits. And be assured there are some you have not noticed, did not see, and some you couldn't or wouldn't believe, even if someone told you.

That last phrase "forget not all his benefits," is in its own way a reminder of something genuine in the experience of believers. We tend to list all the things we are aware of that God has done for us. It is not a bad exercise. But not one of us makes such a list and catches everything that God has done, or given or kept us safe from. We list, only the things we have noticed. And we never notice everything. Here is a reminder that God's grace, HIS love, HIS saving presence is always greater than we perceive.

"Praises the Lord O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Two verses, at the very centre of the Bible. And what they say, is absolutely central, to living for God, following Jesus.

Let us pray;

Lord fill our minds and our bodies with the power to do things that causes us and those with whom we share life to praise your name. Draw us to worship on days and in moments when we cannot see how praising you will make a difference, how serving you will change things. We can only be filled with wonder when we consider the way you have made us. Your presence in our lives brings benefits we cannot number and often do not notice. We praise you Lord with body, mind and spirit. Amen