



Gospel / life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Meditation – Psalm 40

Read the psalm together – it is full of parallel statements that make it suitable for *responsive reading*.

I waited patiently for the LORD; *he turned to me and heard my cry.*
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, *out of the mud and mire;*
he set my feet on a rock *and gave me a firm place to stand.*
He put a new song in my mouth, *a hymn of praise to our God.* //

Many will see and fear, *and put their trust in the LORD.*
Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done.
The things you planned for us no-one can recount to you;
were I to speak and tell of them, *they would be too many to declare.* //

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced;
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, "Here I am, *I have come—it is written about me in the scroll.*
I desire to do your will, O my God; *your law is within my heart."* //

I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD.
I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation.
I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly. //

Do not withhold your mercy from me, O LORD;
may your love and your truth always protect me.
For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head, *and my heart fails within me.* //

Be pleased, O LORD, to save me; *O LORD, come quickly to help me.*
May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace.
May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" be appalled at their own shame.
But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who love your salvation always say, "The LORD be exalted!" //

Yet I am poor and needy; *may the Lord think of me.*
You are my help and my deliverer; *O my God, do not delay.* //

In small groups: Share what part of this psalm spoke to you in a fresh, real or deep way today?

Study 21: The Burnt Offering and Our Ambitions, Hopes and Plans

“Love the LORD your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut. 6:5).”

This command, which is given symbolic and ritual form in the whole burnt offering, clearly envisages that we as the people of God throw ourselves, in the totality of our being, into the service and action of God. The command demands not envisage an apathetic or passive relationship with God, but rather one filled with dynamic and action and drive.

Is it possible to serve God this way without personally owning ambitions, hopes and plans? At times it seems that Christians are embarrassed about having such ambitions, hopes and plans. It is certainly true that ambition can be a very dangerous thing, and lead people into all kinds of wrong. *Scheming* has very selfish connotations! And yet the person with no ambition, no plans, no hopes for life is also in a terrible place. He or she can be a bit of a jellyfish, drifting on the current and again living very selfishly, hoping for others to support and provide for him or her. Both desiring and not desiring have their problems!

The Bible itself is not always critical of desire, ambition and planning. In fact, in Psalm 20:4, David gives to the people of God a prayer for the king. As they pray for him, especially they pray that the Lord will grant to him the desire of his heart, and make all his plans succeed! In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul says, “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (=elder/leader in the church), he desires a noble task.” The word translated “sets his heart” has this idea of eagerness, longing, “ambition” about it. Paul’s saying is both encouraging and cautionary—it is good to have this desire, but remember that it is a service of particular demand and responsibility. Being a leader will both build you more and more, but also demand that you grow and grow!

1 Kings 3:1-15

At the start of his rule, Solomon recognised his personal need for help from the LORD. He showed his love for the LORD by walking in obedience to the commands of God, but he did not recognise yet how inappropriate it was for him to continue the practice, widely held through Israel, of offering sacrifices and burning incense on the high places (3:3). (He was to be given the task of building the Temple that would finally and fully mark the end of this practice, which mixed the revelation of God with pagan practice.)

Gibeon was one such high place. At the start of his reign, Solomon went there and offered 1000 burnt offering on the altar there (3:4). That night the LORD appeared to him in a dream and spoke with him, telling him to ask for whatever he wanted (3:5). It seems to me to be a very risky offer to make! How would you respond to such a request? Solomon’s answer is very wonderful. Firstly he recognises that it is the kindness and grace of God that has seen him become king, and that this is in faithfulness to the promises God made to his father, David (3:6). Secondly he openly confesses his sense of inadequacy for the task of being king—he is young and inexperienced, the people are great and numerous nation (3:7-8). And then thirdly he makes his request: “So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong (3:9).”

Solomon actually could have tried to weasel out of the responsibilities that had come to him. Certainly the first king of Israel, Saul had tried to do so. Though the prophet Samuel had anointed him and given a prophetic word to him (1Sam. 9, 10:1-8), when the time came for the coronation and the public affirmation of his being king, Saul could not be found, for he had hidden himself away (1Sam. 10:22-23).

Solomon's request was very pleasing to the LORD. (1Kings 3:10) He actually asked for what he saw that he needed. He didn't respond with, "Oh well, whatever you think best"—he made an actual request. Moreover, his request was all about the commission that was being given him: it was a request that he be provided with what was needed to successfully fulfil the commission being given him; i.e. discernment for administering justice. He refused the possibilities of long life (=personal security), wealth, and the death of enemies: all these requests would have been about him keeping his position (3:11). What he asked for was so that he could be faithful and competent in what was being given to him to do.

What is interesting in what happens next is that Solomon seems to have gained insight or wisdom about the whole matter of the high places! He leaves Gibeon and heads to Jerusalem, and there he offers burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the ark of the covenant (1Kings 3:15).

Matthew 6:19-34

Jesus was teaching his disciples about the dynamics of kingdom living in the Sermon on the Mount. He tackled the issue of desire and ambition. Firstly, belonging to the kingdom means that we put aside the desire for the accumulation of wealth. Instead we are to store up "treasure in heaven". This treasure in heaven is really the pleasure of the Father. Serving God is contrasted with serving "Mammon". Mammon is a personification of wealth as a living master who demands service. It is a way of speaking of riches as a false god. It is a word deriving from the Aramaic word *mamona*, which simply means "wealth". Storing up treasure here is a variation of worshipping what ought not to be worshipped.

Storing up treasures is an expression of *worry*. Jesus instructs us to not worry about life: our food and drink, our clothing. Life is a much bigger issue than all these things. In creation the birds are fed, the flowers are clothed. We matter a whole lot more to the heavenly Father than these things (and they do matter to him, such that He knows when a sparrow dies). He knows what we need, and so will in due time provide for us. What is most significant to us is not providing these for ourselves, but rather that we *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*.

God wants to pierce the ears of his people. We are surrounded by all kinds of demands upon us. Our ambition and hope may be shaped by these demands. Through the din of the demands comes the piercing voice of the Lord, who speaks to us so that we can respond to him, "I desire to do your will O Lord."

Next week we will consider the burnt offering of Isaac by Abraham, and its significance for us as God's people.