



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

Reading: Psalm 40 : 1 – 7 He set my feet on a rock

BACKGROUND TO THE READING

We are told that Psalm 40 is a psalm of King David and that it was written for the director of music and so presumably it was written to be sung.

It might actually be two psalms together because it is in two distinct parts. The first part of the psalm is a song of thanksgiving and praise to God for all that he has done for David. The second part is a call for God to come and help David without delay and in fact verses 13 to 17 form psalm 70, the words are virtually the same, a psalm of petition to God.

We are concerned with the first verses of the psalm today. David waited patiently for the Lord, underlining his faithfulness and commitment. He has obviously been in a very dark place, probably spiritually and emotionally. He describes this darkness in strong language – he was in the slimy pit, in the mud and the mire. We have seen images of mudslides and flood and mire on our televisions this week and we have been all too aware of the helplessness of people in the face of such adversity.

Perhaps David was thinking of the practice of putting a person in a pit if he had done something wrong. The person would be put in the pit and a stone moved over the entrance – he would be left in there for the duration of his sentence or perhaps even until he died. He would be pulled out and the next person put in. The picture is one of suffocating confinement, stench, foul mud and darkness.

Contrast this with the joy of being rescued by the Lord, lifted up from the pit, placed on a rock with a firm foundation. We are told that the Lord blesses his people and carries out wonders and puts a song of joy into the hearts of his people.

Most commentators see this psalm as prophetic, not just about King David but also about the Son of David, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of waiting patiently for God, of doing his will even when that meant pain and sacrifice.

For us, Jesus entered into the slimy pit, into the darkness of evil and sin, Jesus who was blameless and free from sin, took on the agony and disgrace of the cross, took on the sins of the world, present and future.

And when Jesus hung on the cross to finish his task on earth and cried out to his Father in heaven, God heard his cry and reached down and lifted Jesus up in glory, up into the throne room of heaven itself – but not before Christ had gone into the depths of hell for us.

In verse 6 it says that God no longer required sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings and sin offerings. The complex Jewish laws required various different sacrifices and rituals for different purposes as atonement for the sins of the people. These offerings would no longer be required when Jesus laid down his life as the final and only sacrifice necessary for our salvation.

Verse 6 says that **my ears have been pierced**. This might simply mean that David's ears had been opened and he understood what God was saying to him. It could also refer to the practice of piercing a slave's ear with a nail if that slave was to belong to his master for his whole life. It was a mark of ownership, of belonging. And so with our relationship to the Lord - when we have been redeemed, we belong to the Lord for the rest of our lives, and beyond the grave, and nothing can change that.

AMEN

SERMON

The text for today's sermon comes from the first 3 verses of Psalm 40

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.

This past week has been one of contrasts for me. On Tuesday and Wednesday I worked on the tiny Orkney Island of Shapinsay and on Friday I worked in London. In fact, I made a home visit on Abbey Road and walked over that famous zebra crossing.

No matter how much I fly, I find it an awesome experience and the flight over snow covered mountains and frozen lochs in the north of Scotland to Orkney was absolutely beautiful. It is so easy to sing a song of praise to our great God in such a situation.

I happened to be reading an article in the newspaper on the flight with a quote from someone who had an even more awesome view of God's world. Astronaut Scott Kelly is a commander on the international space station orbiting earth and he said last week "As I look out of the window I see a very beautiful planet that seems very inviting and peaceful." And then he adds "Unfortunately it is not."

You see, Commander Kelly is the brother-in-law of Gabrielle Giffords, the American politician shot and seriously wounded in a shop in Arizona in an incident that saw six

people killed. The media were quick to tell us that the little girl who died had been born on 9/11.

And so Commander Kelly tells us that the world is not beautiful and it is not inviting and it is not peaceful. If you read newspapers and listen to radio news and tune into News 24, you might agree. Do you not feel that the news is utterly depressing? We hear of murder and violent crime, of flood and mudslides, of addictions and economic decline, of corruption and war.

God has lifted us out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire and set our feet on a rock – and yet we are constantly being told that the world is a dark place and our spirits can be sucked down into that darkness and despair. Our rock can be shaky.

The media revels in bad news. We were told a few days ago that 500 blackbirds fell from the sky in Louisiana. There followed stories of 50 jackdaws found dead in a street in Sweden and 2 million spot fish found dead along a shoreline in Maryland. An article pointed out that **these events are not linked but similar scenarios across the world are adding to the mystery.** No they are not adding to the mystery, such events have explanations, such events have occurred throughout history, they are not new.

God created our world and everything in it and he is still in control. There is great beauty in the world. Most of the people in this world are ordinary decent individuals getting on with their lives. There are many more acts of kindness and love and caring in our world than acts of evil and cruelty. Christians around the world are carrying out small miracles every day as they follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The international church is growing steadily as more and more people are pulled from the mud and mire and given a firm place to stand.

These positive things do not make headlines, do not sell newspapers. Of course, we must be made aware of those in need in the world and of suffering and injustice so that we can lift people and situations to God in prayer, so that we can send help and support relief agencies, so that we can give and share.

But do not be afraid in these days, stand firm, trust in God and in Jesus Christ who redeemed you. Julian of Norwich was a deeply Christian woman who committed her whole life to prayer and worship and she famously said hundreds of years ago “**All will be well and all will be well and all things will be well.**”

I hope you believe that all will be well for you in Christ. I hope that your feet are set on a rock today and that you stand firm. Paul wrote that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. Those who have been found by Christ have been pulled from their own slimy pit, from their sin and their despair.

And yet we have a tendency to slip back into the mud. At times we let negativity control us, we feel overwhelmed by waves of guilt from a past that we cannot forget or from ongoing sin that we cannot control. Andre spoke last week about the baggage we carry around with us, the baggage of past sin, like stuff in a suitcase, a heavy suitcase. God has forgiven us for all that we have confessed to him, he does

not hold it against us but we still like to revisit it, to open up old wounds and wallow in the mud of self pity and doubt. We need to cut loose the baggage.

A former colleague, Norman Drummond, calls this letting go of the guard's van. Norman is an ordained Church of Scotland minister and has had a varied career including army chaplain, headmaster of Loretto School in Musselburgh, BBC governor and more recently a life coach, inspiring people to achieve their potential and develop leadership skills, especially from underprivileged backgrounds.

Norman wrote that he finds many people are weighed down by the baggage of the past. Their fears, regrets, guilt and shame are like a millstone round their necks, they have done something they are ashamed of and they cannot let go. This is the guard's van. If life were a train this would be the van at the back, carrying all sorts of odds and ends and trailing along wherever the rest goes. And a large part of the journey for many of us would be spent revisiting the guard's van to remind ourselves of the contents.

There's an old film called North West Frontier in which the characters are taking a train across a desert. Kenneth More plays the hero helping a small group of people, mainly women and children, to escape from a hostile situation. But the train is too heavy to go on. So More climbs down behind the last carriage of the moving train and uncouples the guard's van from the rest of the train and lets it go. Unburdened, the train moves on much more freely and swiftly to its destination.

So many of us need to let go of that Guard's Van that we are dragging around. Many find it hard to let go because they have been attached to this van full of misery and regret for years – but the sense of relief and of freedom when letting go is immense.

If we allow ourselves to slip back into the mud, even if it is only up to our ankles, we need to remember that Christ gave his life for this very purpose, to lift us up, to give us a firm foundation, to invite us to share eternity with him. Keep your eyes fixed firmly on Jesus.

Even Peter sank below the waves when he took his eyes off Jesus. In Matthew 14 we read that Peter left the boat and began to walk towards Jesus on the water. But when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the wind and the waves, he became afraid and began to sink. He cried to Jesus for help and immediately Jesus reached out and pulled him from the water. "You of little faith" he said, "why did you doubt?" Peter slipped back into the mud a few times but Jesus was patient with him and succeeded in placing his feet on the rock and Peter certainly sang a new song of praise to God. And so the third part of psalm 40 came about – because of Peter's witness and evangelism – many saw and were in awe and put their trust in the Lord.

Because Jesus does not put our feet on the rock and give us a firm foundation just for our own sakes, he also wants the world to hear the new song that we sing so that others too can be pulled up from the mud and the mire – psalm 40 is a psalm of evangelism.

I will finish by mentioning one of the strongest rocks of the 20th century church – Martin Luther King – because tomorrow is his birthday and this is the Sunday when he is remembered in many churches around the world and especially in the United States

Jesus put Luther King's feet on a rock and gave him a firm place to stand when he was 26 years old and throughout his ministry he was a light in dark places, seeking justice and equality for black people in a prejudiced society.

He preached an amazing sermon, not one that began "I have a dream" but one in which he said –

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you but I want you to know today that we as a people will get to that promised land.

So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The next day, Martin Luther King was assassinated.

Luther King lived out the sentiments of psalm 40 –

He waited patiently for the Lord and cried out to him for his people

His faith was a firm foundation to all he did

He sang a new song, a song of love and equality and brotherhood and sisterhood

And through his ministry many saw and put their trust in the Lord.

AMEN