



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Minister: Rev Dr André J Groenewald

8 Manse Court, East Calder, Livingston, EH53 0HF

Tel: 01506 884585, Mob: 075 888 458 14, email: groenstes@yahoo.com

www.knec4jesus.org.uk



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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Psalm 146

Background of the reading

The Psalmist was a poet who praised the Lord and warned the people of the dangers of trusting other human beings. The Lord God is Sovereign and rules for ever and ever. He stays in control despite governments who come and go, all the disasters of the earth and new technologies. For the Psalmist is convinced: life is a song of joy! And with this he summarises the theme of the last five Psalms of the Psalm book that is Psalms 146 to 150. The compilers of the Psalm book wanted to stress the fact that there comes an end to all of life's sorrow, suffering, hardship, sadness, and grief. In the end it has to make way for joy and peace in the Lord.

But as always the Hebrew text of the Psalm urges us to clarify a few things:

The psalmist talks of how his soul wants to praise God. In the Old Testament times it was believed that the soul is situated in the throat where the vein of life is situated. Once this vein is cut, no one has a chance to survive! It is therefore often associated with the word for breath. So the psalmist is actually saying that he is praising God with everything he has – his life, his whole existence! God is so important to him. God is so close to him, in every breath he breathes, he wants to thank the Lord!

Then he goes on to say that although God is Sovereign and so powerful, He is also loving and merciful, attending to all the needs of his children. He looks after the needs of the oppressed. The Hebrew term for the oppressed is concerned with acts of abuse of power or authority, the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in station. Oppression, hence, is a grievous sin

against which Israel was warned in stern terminology. One is never to oppress or rob his neighbour, or his hired servant, whether a fellow Israelite or a foreign traveller. Ludicrous is the poor man who would oppress the lowly. Those most likely to be mistreated and oppressed were those without adequate defence of their rights, i.e. the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and the poor. Against none of these were evil acts to be directed or contemplated. Such acts of oppression are a breach of faith against God. The king, a regent under God had as a divine task the vindication of those oppressed by wicked men. The king was to “crush the oppressor”. God even takes care of those who are abused!

He gives bread to the poor. All food is the gift of God. He planted the Garden of Eden and caused all the trees to grow which were good for food. Likewise the Psalmist asserts that God “caused the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetables for the service of man: that he may bring food from the ground ... and bread which strengthens man’s heart”. Yes, he “gives food to all flesh”; to the hungry and to the beasts and young ravens. God himself even instructs man the principles of agriculture: how to prepare the ground, how to sow the seed in rows or to broadcast others, and how to harvest each after patiently waiting the appointed number of days. He provides in the daily needs of all his children.

He even sets all the prisoners free from whatever bondage they are suffering.

He opens the eyes of everyone who is blind to see his wonders, miracles, justice and love.

He lifts up everyone who is bowed down. The meaning of “bow down” is to be in some form of distress, or to experience worries or anxiety. It was also an act of worship or humility before God. God takes care of everyone who feels very lonely, hopeless and depressed.

He loves those who want to obey Him and serve him alone.

He takes care of all the marginalized like the foreigner or stranger, the widow and the fatherless or in other words the orphans.

All foreigners in Israel were those who were not blood relatives, someone who did not enjoy the rights usually possessed by the resident.; and thus was dependent on the hospitality that played an important role in the ancient near east. When the people of Israel lived with their neighbours they were usually treated as protected citizens; foreigners in Israel were largely regarded as

proselytes, people who could convert to Judaism. They were also obliged to be present for the solemn reading of the Law showing that they were also exposed to its demands. The law concerning “unleavened bread” applied to them as well and a circumcised *foreigner/stranger* could keep Passover. They were also included in the festival of the Great Day of Atonement and were expected to celebrate the Feast of Booths. With the native Jews they were also threatened with the death penalty if they offered a sacrifice to a foreign god and were forbidden to eat blood. They also enjoyed many of the same rights as the native and were not to be oppressed. The stranger is often mentioned in connection with the poor and with orphans and widows.

Deuteronomy 24:19-21 and other texts clearly state that:

“¹⁹ When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien/foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.”

Now the psalmist says the Lord takes care of the foreigner just as He cares for the widow and the orphan. In the context of the Old Testament it was the chief responsibility of a righteous king to take care of the widow and the fatherless children. The people of the Old Testament lived in a patriarchal society which meant that every family had a patriarchal head which was usually the older brother who was head of the whole family and who had to take care of all the family members and who had to defend them in times of war and conflict. For those who did not have such a patriarchal head, the king was to stand in and help them.

Although God is merciful and loving, He is also just. He does not help the wicked – those who refuses to trust and obey him. Psalm 1 expresses the same idea when it clearly states that the ways of the wicked will perish!

God reigns forever. Zion frequently occurs in poetic passages, referring to the Hill in Jerusalem where the temple was situated. The Jews believed that Zion was the area where God dwells. Therefore the Psalmist is using poetic language to show that Zion is the religious centre, not only for Israel, but for the entire world.

Then the psalmist closes his “ode of joy “with the same words he started it

namely Hallelujah!

Amen

Sermon

The text verses for the sermon are: ³ Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. ⁴ When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing."

The Psalmist praises God as the giver and sustainer of all life. God can be trusted because He is always present.

He takes care of all his children in a big way. He has no favourites or step children. He loves each and everyone. He attends to the need of each and everyone wherever they are.

I talked to the BB's this week about how some people laugh at the fact that God can be trusted more than a mobile phone or a computer or even a SATNAV!

The thing is: a mobile phone is not always reliable – its battery can run flat or the signal might be lost when you are in a bad signal area. But you can rely on God always and ever! He never ever loses contact with his children not even in a storm or when his children needs his urgent help. He will help you in ways you never predicted or suspected. You do not need to have special skills to contact him. You do have to have any money or a prepaid card to speak to him. You can just say: Help me Lord! You can just say: I am sorry. You can just say: I do not know which way to go!

A computer can instantly in just one second lose all your data almost wiping out all your hard work. God will never forget about you or your hard work. You are important to him. Your data is safe with him. He will not gossip or tell tales of your most inner secrets to anyone. He will never hold a grudge against you. And unlike a computer which does not save your data for always and ever, God did save you in Jesus Christ for always and ever. Unlike a computer which you throw away when it is old and not working properly, God will not throw you away when you are ill, old and weary. He will help you even after you die.

Through Jesus' resurrection, He destroyed death and made a new kingdom possible

A SATNAV can also misdirect you in a direction which you wished never existed! God will direct you in the right direction. Unlike the horrible voice of a SATNAV He will gently lead you in the best possible direction. But you need to listen to him as He speaks through his Holy Word which will mean that you read the Bible or come to church. He will sometimes take you on a longer road just because He knows all the things you cannot handle on the shorter route. But you must trust him. He knows better. He gave us his Holy Spirit to direct and help us. When you feel lonely and utterly lost just ask him for help.

And then just one after thought: No computer could predict the tsunami or the ash clouds or the big freeze. But God knew all about them. God is always available!

May we all go out of this building and look through new eyes to the technology around us and trust God more in the small and big things of life ... Jesus did come to end our suffering. He changed our lamentations into songs of praise. Let us therefore say in agreement with the Psalmist: Hallelujah! I would like now to ask the congregation to stand up and say Hallelujah if you agree with the Psalmist this morning that God is the only one who can be trusted always and ever...

Amen.