

LIGHT AND SALVATION

Epiphany 3 Year A

Is. 9:1-4; Ps. 27:1, 4-9; 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Mt. 4:12-23

Gladstone 26/01/2020

In *The Charlie Brown Christmas*, animated movie, Charlie Brown is feeling depressed. He's not sure why, but he knows something is wrong. So, he pays a visit to Lucy's psychiatrist booth. After he gives her his nickel, Lucy asks Charlie Brown what's bothering him. She names a series of phobias to see what he might be afraid of. These phobias range from the fear of cats to the fear of climbing stairs. When, she gets to "*pantophobia*," she leans across the counter and asks Charlie Brown: "Do you have *pantophobia*?" He asks her for a definition. She tells him that "*pantophobia*" is the "fear of everything." "That's it!" he shouts so strongly and loudly that he knocks her right out of the booth. So, do you have *pantophobia*?

Even if we don't have *pantophobia*, I think we can all sympathize with Charlie Brown. All of us, I would suggest, from time to time, struggle with fear—and the causes of these fears are often very real. The media is resplendent, daily, with all kinds of things we might regard as enemies for us to fear—war, terrorism, random and not so random acts of violence and so on. Christians, in particular, have enemies too, as all around the world they are being persecuted—from India to Indonesia to Iraq and other places in the Middle East, and indeed, all over the world—and in all kinds of ways—physical, mental, spiritual, social and psychological.

There are also enemies much closer to home—bullies at school, abusive spouses, competitors at work, opponents in church disputes (No, that never happens!), not to mention the spiritual forces of wickedness who always lurk behind the scenes of every human conflict (Eph. 6:10-20). Enemies can make the Christian life very dark indeed.

And even if world events don't get our attention, and we're not subject to these interpersonal enemies of conflict, such as persecution and abuse, we might have other reasons to be anxious. It might be a doctor's visit, for instance, or the ending of a relationship, or the prospect of losing a loved one.

Fear is one of the most difficult aspects of our human experience. There are some things that are just simply frightening, and it's only human for us to respond to them with fear—even if it's just fear of the unknown. But it's one thing for us to feel fear—it's another thing for us to live constantly in fear. Too often, we turn fear into something that occupies our

whole lives. Part of the problem with fear is what it does to us when we give it that much power. We cling to whatever it is we fear losing—we hold on for dear life. In the process of trying to control what we cannot control, and trying to cling to what we cannot hold, our fear can bring out the worst in us.

It's in the midst of these concerns that we hear the promise of Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

The Psalms—pretty much all of them—remind us, if we need reminding, that life is not always plain sailing—that things do not always go the way we would like—that difficulties and disappointments lurk around every corner, and face us at every point. King David, the author of Psalm 27, had his own fair share of fear, disillusionment and frustration, and although he lived hundreds of years ago, his psalms have a surprisingly modern ring about them.

It's kind of unfortunate that the lectionary reading from Psalm 27, this morning, leaves out a lot of verses. What we have in verses 1 and 4-9 are all the positive affirmations about our relationship with God and our need only to rely upon him. What it leaves out, are the verses that give those positive affirmations their context.

David tells us that this psalm grew out of experiences of difficulty and times of testing. He writes, in verse 2, that, The wicked had come against him to devour him. We know from David's life and experience that these enemies were no figment of his imagination. They were very much a part of the essence of God's leading him and dealing with him. Over and over David talks about them. His life was full of them—from his dismissive older brothers and that insulting giant, Goliath, to lions and bears attacking his flock of sheep, to Saul and the Philistines, to his own children, and, indeed, his own sinful nature.

We may not find ourselves as outcasts, pursued by potential murderers, with our life on the line. Well, at least, I hope that's not the case. But our problems may still be quite severe and no less difficult. We may feel at times that all hope has gone, and that our resources are diminishing fast. We may feel that to be left at the mercy of circumstances, under their immediacy and tyranny, is to be torn apart and left with nothing.

Yet David had learned that when you trust in God, you can get your enemies in perspective. David writes: "Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear" (v3). Here is a man who knows not only the reality of adverse circumstances, but also knows of

hidden resources to meet every eventuality and difficulty. He is confident of the keeping and protecting care of God. Take no thought for tomorrow, says Christ to us, tomorrow will take care of itself. Be anxious about nothing, says Paul, the peace of God will guard the hearts of His people (Phil. 4:6).

These are the hidden resources of the people of God, and they grow out of a lifetime of following God and knowing God. Indeed, the more difficult life becomes for us, the more precious the grace of God becomes, and the more we will lean on his everlasting arms.

And so, the question is; what can we do to keep our eyes off our enemies, or whatever else makes our lives dark and frightening? What can we do to gain balance and calm in the midst of hostility?

Well, we can do what the Psalmist's heart told him to do in verse 8. "Seek his face!" Rather than focusing on the faces of his enemies, he seeks the face of God. And that's what we have to do in order to see in the midst of the darkness that so often surrounds us.

But what does that mean, in practical terms? Verse 4 tells us. "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." So, let's unpack that a bit. "One thing I ask, this is what I seek ... to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord...." "One thing...." That's a key, right there—a single minded focus.

One of the reasons we don't walk as confidently as David, indeed, can't, is that our eyes dart everywhere. There are so many things set to distract us. Our desires reach out in so many directions. We seek so many things. And the result is that we end up seeing a lot more darkness than God. Instead of clarity, we find only fuzziness and confusion. In order to walk confidently, we must single-mindedly seek God's face.

In Psalm 27, David takes us right to the heart and secret of his strength. It's his desire to know the fellowship and blessing of God in all things. David's desire was to serve God in His temple, and to dwell in God's house all his days. There he found the secret of confidence and strength—complete trust in God. In adverse circumstances and evil days, he found that God would hide him and set him high.

David is illustrating a very important principle here. Having sought God in the sunshine, he can have confidence in the shadows. He didn't wait until he was completely at the end of his tether, before he sought God's help and blessing. No, he made use of opportunities for worship and service when he had them, and these were now made a blessing to him. Through them, he became aware of God's sustaining grace when events conspired against him.

How many of us only pray in adversity—when bad things happen—who are religious only in stormy weather? Those who find true comfort in fellowship with God in prayer are those who came to Him when things were well. Then, in times of evil and difficulty and discouragement, He will not fail them.

One of the disturbing facts of Christian life that I have noticed over the past few years, is that Christians seemingly have become less diligent in their practice of worship—and I struggle to understand it. Those who used to go to church almost every Sunday, are now only going only once or twice a month. And those who only went only once or twice a month are hardly ever seen. We get distracted by work, by family, by leisure, or by the prospect of avocado on toast for brunch at the local café.

Why is it that as life get crazier, it's our worship that tends to suffer most—when it's at these times—when life is busy and the enemies are hard at work, that we need to be more diligent in our practice of worship. No wonder our fears and anxieties are on the rise. It's in our worship that we get to see the big picture—get to see the final end of our enemies—and are able to gain the strength and confidence to rely on God to help us deal with our fears.

Fear is a natural part of being human. Unfortunately, however, we have a way of letting our fear get the best of us. But fear doesn't have to control us. As we learn to find the light of God's presence always surrounding us and protecting us, always bringing good out of anything that may come our way, we can feel our fears, but live from our faith. Then we can find a kind of safety that nothing can shake—at least not for long. Then we can say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.