

The City of Our God

Psalm 48

I wonder if you could name the 10 Scottish Castles named as the greatest Scottish Castles by Visit Scotland

Edinburgh Castle
Glamis Castle
Braemar Castle
Balmoral Castle
Stirling Castle
Eileen Donan Castle
Dunottar Castle
Cawdor Castle
Inveraray Castle
Blair Castle

Which ones did they miss out?
Castle Menzies of course
And Craginethan Castle

Now I want us to imagine that you went one of these Castles
Lets just choose Stirling Castle because you can walk the ramparts

Imagine you were a tour guide to a group of young people

And as you were to walk through the ramparts
You would count the towers
You would look at the walls, the ramparts
You would take a view of the various strongpoints, the citadels

And then you would turn to that group of young people
And you would say these words

“For this God is our God for ever and ever;
He will be our guide even to the end.”

What would strike you as wrong about that?

That perhaps you were claiming religious justification for military victories
That you were overly spiritualising what are just bricks and mortar
That you shouldn't be indoctrinating young people like that.

That this kind of language might be appropriate for a retreat to Iona Abbey, or to Lindisfarne, the Holy Island, or maybe even up above Castle Menzies at St David's well, but that's not the sort of language which is appropriate to a Castle.

But that is what happens in that psalm.

Look at this verse here

"Walk around Zion

Go round her

Count her towers

Consider well her ramparts,

View her citadels

That you may tell of them to the next generation,

For this God is our God for ever and ever

He will be our guide even to the end"

(Verse 12-14)

There is something very provocative about this, about the willingness to claim that this place of military defence is the place that reminds us of God.

So lets consider the psalm as a whole, to engage with some of the thinking here.

So first of all lets look at the psalm, and say, how would you describe the central thrust of the sections...

Section 1 - The greatness of God making Zion and its King Great

A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah.

1

Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.

2

Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon[b] is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.

3

God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress.

Section 2 - The Story of a great victory

4

When the kings joined forces,
when they advanced together,

5

they saw her and were astounded;
they fled in terror.

6

Trembling seized them there,
pain like that of a woman in labor.

7

You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish
shattered by an east wind.

8

As we have heard,
so we have seen
in the city of the Lord Almighty,
in the city of our God:
God makes her secure
forever.[c]

Section 3 - Zion the place to contemplate the reach of God

9

Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing love.

10

Like your name, O God,
your praise reaches to the ends of the earth;
your right hand is filled with righteousness.

11

Mount Zion rejoices,
the villages of Judah are glad
because of your judgments.

Section 4 - Zion, the place which teaches us about the greatness of God

12

Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,

13

consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them
to the next generation.

14

For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide even to the end.

Part 1 - Beauty

Where God is a place cannot be but beautiful and elevated.

So, we see that in the city we see the place that were God is, the place is magnificent,

That so often when people visit Jerusalem, they tell you how small it is, they tell you that Mount Zion doesn't quite seem quite so high,

That you don't look at Mount Zion in the same way you see the Matterhorn, or Ben Lawers, but something about knowing the presence of God, gives this place a beauty that you would not always ascribe to it.

In knowing that God is here, you see the beauty.

Now as Christians we have to remember the story of the death of Jesus at this point. Do you remember at the death of Jesus that the temple curtain was torn in two Which meant that God was no longer to be thought of as confined That the whole earth would be full of God's glory.

I always remember the story of George MacLeod
Who would tell the story of a Church stained glass window
On which were the words
"Glory to God in the highest"

And then a boy came along with stones and through them at the window
Desecrating the window
So that it no longer read "Glory to God in the Highest"
But "Glory to God in the High St."

And that sense now that the whole earth is God's
That God is to be found here.

I often think of the time that I went round the riding of the March Stones of Rutherglen with a Councillor, the previous years Queen - who was chewing gum and in a shell suit, and we would go to the March Stone, and declare it was there, I think I may have offered the odd prayer, but I would want to say everything here in Rutherglen is of God.

I would want to say this of our Parish, to go and stand on Keltneyburn, to stand at Castle Menzies, to stand on the fields up at Glassie
To stand at the distillery
To go and stand in our communities - Tayside Crescent, Appin Place, Moness Crescent
This is the place of the Lord
This is God's world
His temple the Church, for we are now the temple, we are here,
And God's radiance makes the height of this place beautiful.

Part 2 verse 47 – Defence of the people against the kings

Now this is the thing

That God defends his people.

And the story of Jerusalem is interesting here,
Because you read the words about the kings gathered together.
And they trembled, and they were astonished, and the people were like people in labour.

Now people are not sure what this refers to - it could be Sennacherib in Isaiah and 2 Kings, but this doesn't quite fit, not least because this psalm might predate that. But it could be that.

But take a look at the fact that verse 4-7 don't explicitly mention Zion,
That makes you wonder if this is a general principle
And then have a look at this language here from Exodus - now you might say that Exodus has nothing to do with Zion, and on one level you would be right, but have a look at this Song of the Sea which celebrates the crossing of the people across the Red Sea...

Who among the gods
is like you, Lord?

Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?

12

"You stretch out your right hand,
and the earth swallows your enemies.

13

In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.

14

The nations will hear and tremble;
anguish will grip the people of Philistia.

15

The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,
the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,
the people[c] of Canaan will melt away;

16

terror and dread will fall on them.
By the power of your arm

they will be as still as a stone—
until your people pass by, Lord,
until the people you bought[d] pass by.

17

You will bring them in and plant them
on the mountain of your inheritance—
the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling,
the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.

The language of Exodus 15 is very similar to the language of Psalm 48.

In fact the language of protection of God's people is universal
This is a God who defends his people.

I have been in conflicts a few times, and realised that God does tend to protect me, don't
mess with us, because God has us.

You live in the protection, the guarding of God, he will get you across the sea.

And Zion is a reminder of that,
The Church is a reminder of that
The burning bush - burnt, but not consumed.

Section 3 - Zion as the place of contemplation of God

Zion, and particularly the temple, is the place of contemplation of God.

Of realising that when the temple is glad, this radiates out to the end of the earth.

The imagination of Israel sees the temple as somehow the universe in microcosm.

This is what Robert Alter said

"The towering ramparts of the city become a nexus for all time and space"

And this is what Elie Wiesel said

"JERUSALEM: the face visible yet hidden, the sap and blood of all that make us live or
renounce life. The spark flashing in the darkness, the murmur rustling through shouts of
happiness and joy. A name, a secret. For the exiled, a prayer. For all others a promise.
Jerusalem: seventeen times destroyed yet never erased. The symbol of survival.
Jerusalem, the city which miraculously transforms man into pilgrim; no one can enter it
and go away unchanged."

This is the place where God is, and it changes us.

Look at this language in the New Testament, and this is repeated...

John 2:18-22

18 The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

20 They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

And not just Jesus, look at these words in Ephesians chapter 2

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Do you see this,
We are the temple
And when we rejoice in the Lord,
This radiates out.

How is your radiating going

When the temple is glad
"Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad"

Lets update that
"The Church rejoices, the villages of Perthshire are glad"

"You are the light of the world said Jesus"

Section 4 - this is forever

Notice that Jerusalem, in the final section is about the assurance of God forever, there is a continuity to Jerusalem, Jerusalem becomes the symbol of building the city for God, to resemble heaven.

Jerusalem was always interpreted four ways in the early Church

- Literally - the people of Zion, the Jews
- Allegorical - The Church
- Morally - the building of a the city of Peace, which is what Jerusalem means
- Analogically - the future new Jerusalem

Look at the way that Jerusalem stretches into time - this is our God forever and ever. Our guide for ever and ever.

We are always building Jerusalem, we are always like Nehemiah and Ezra, building Jerusalem, building it until the New Jerusalem comes.

This is the words of Blake's poem,

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.*

We build Jerusalem in the hope that we will never get there in this life
But still we build

We build the city of peace, we are the Church, the ones who welcome the refugee, who build relationships amongst neighbours, who are the source of joy
And who bring people into the temple, into the place of faith, in the place of presence
Who bring young people, the next generation into the knowledge

We build Jerusalem with a sure hope, because one day at the end of time, the New Jerusalem will come - Revelation

21 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth,"[a] for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'[b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

When it says forever and forever, this is our hope, the New Jerusalem, the place of peace

This is the hope to which sing, and which celebrate int the last supper which was first celebrated as a meal in Jerusalem, the city of God, the Holy Place

AMEN