

Two Psalm verses

Psalm 19 / Nehemiah 8.1-10

The Psalm appointed for today really seems to be two separate poems. The first is about the revelation of God to everyone in the created universe, and the second is the specific revelation of God given to the people of Israel in the laws which we hear about in today's Old Testament reading from Nehemiah. I want to think about the very first verse, and then the very last verse – one from each of those two poems, if that is what they originally were.

Let me first of all concentrate on the very first verse of the Psalm 19. There is a sense in which we know both more and less about the heavens than the writer of the Psalm. We know more because we have amazing telescopes, positioned up in space, beyond the distortions that looking through the earth's atmosphere produces. But we know less (most of us) because we live in a world full of what they call 'light pollution' – so being able to see the stars is something we can only do properly if we go well away from inhabited areas, and hope for fine weather. The ancients saw that amazing display of apparently infinite numbers of specks of light every night.

It was a great Christian who challenged the accepted interpretation of what is to be seen. The writer of the Psalms, and everyone else down to 1532, when the Polish priest, doctor and astronomer Nicholas Copernicus published a paper called *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*; (On the revolution of celestial bodies) in which he put forward his belief that the planets went around the sun, and that the sun, not the earth was the centre of the universe as it was then understood. Galileo's promotion of that theory led condemnation as a heretic.

Today we have the possibility of our narrow understanding of the universe being challenged. We now know our sun is just one of billions, and scientists have found some possible earth-like planets, which therefore may sustain life as we know it, or maybe not as we know it Jim! The scientists at CERN have a concern that maybe the Einsteinian basis of physics – $E=MC^2$ may be flawed. We need to be open to a bigger God than we ever knew, and certainly bigger than the Psalmist knew. We need to ponder on Sydney Carter's words sixty years ago or more: 'Who can tell what other cradle high above the Milky Way still may rock the King of heaven on another Christmas Day?' We are often blind to the stars – we mustn't blind ourselves to a smaller God that we claim to worship. He is the creator things seen and unseen, and who knows what they may include?

Now let me move to the very last verse.

C.S.Lewis, he of Narnia and Screwtape, an academic scholar of literature, said of this Psalm 'This is the greatest poem in the Psalter, and one of the greatest lyrics in the world'. High praise indeed. The very last

verse maybe well be the most familiar: ‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.’ Familiar because with the alteration of ‘meditation of *my* heart’ to something like ‘meditation of *all our* hearts’, it has been one of those things which preachers have used as a prayer at the beginning of sermons. That wasn’t its original intention, and it is that original phrase I want to think about – but that adaptation of it is a reminder that when someone is preaching, it is part of a two-way process. If the speaker is not being listened to, and the listeners are not playing their part, then he or she might as well go home.

But let’s go back to what it actually says. It is a reminder of the need to be consistent in what we say and think. Saying one thing, but thinking another is a source of huge unhappiness in this world. It is a kind of lying. It is always misleading, and is a breach of trust. But the Psalmist is not thinking about what we say and think to each other, but what we say and think in the sight of God. That will no doubt include what we say and think in human relationships, but it is bigger than that. It is asking that we have total integrity in both the outward and inward aspects of our life. What we say represents what is known and shared by others – our public face. What we meditate – what we *think* - is what is known only to us, or more accurately known only to us and God. God can’t be fooled. As it says in Psalm 139 ‘You discern my thoughts from afar’. In that wonderful prayer from the c.16th Sarum Primer which begins ‘God be in my head’ there are two lines which say the same as that verse in the Psalm: ‘God be in my mouth and in my speaking; God be in my heart and in my thinking.’ The outward and the inward need to be unified, in harmony. It is not always easy, which is why the Psalmist prays the prayer, and why we should also.