

Psalm 14

Ballarat Cathedral

28th July, 2024

One morning recently, Jill and I were sharing the newspaper. I had the back half and was concentrating on solving the crossword. Jill, who had been reading the front half, which is full of world news and articles commenting on current affairs, suddenly pushed the paper away in a disillusioned sort of way, and said,

What is the world coming to? Everything's just so depressing.

I knew what she meant. I had had the same feeling watching the TV news the previous evening. I'm sure you know exactly what I mean: it overwhelms you sometimes, doesn't it?

The world is going to hell in a handcart: every day it seems we hear of a new war or civil unrest; everywhere governments are tyrannical or hopelessly incompetent, or both. It seems that every day there are random acts of violence in public places and in private homes; scammers are extorting millions from unsuspecting individuals. Everywhere the signs of environmental degradation and climate change are becoming more and more worrying. And, even more frightening, you get the impression there is no sign that things will soon get better; there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Of course you know the feeling. And we have just heard a poem by someone who would completely agree with us. He lived long ago, but back then the view of how we humans make a mess of everything was just as depressing then. That was why he wrote a deeply

personal poem, Psalm 14, which Chris has just sung for us so delightfully to express his frustration and depression at the state of the world. He would completely sympathise with us in our despair, as we can with him. Did you notice his cry from the heart?

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse.

This poem was composed in a far-off time and place, and if the poet were magically transported into our day and age, he might think he had been taken to another planet. He wouldn't have a clue about our technology, but if we sat him down in front of the TV or played him a podcast in a language he knew, he would realise that nothing has changed in 3,000 years. He would instantly recognise how the rich exploit the poor and the strong abuse the weak.

So, what is the cause of the miserable state of our world, whether back in the his time, or today? He states it in the opening words:

Fools say in their hearts there is no God.

He is not talking about some celebrity atheist giving a lecture arguing that God does not exist. He isn't describing well-meaning people who think about life and decide that, on balance, God is a figment of our imagination. No, these are 'fools', who don't want to give up their life of complete self-indulgence, so they tell themselves (they "say in their heart") they don't owe allegiance to any higher authority. The Hebrew word translated as 'fools' doesn't refer to simple people who are a bit too thick to grasp the truth. It means something like 'blundering idiots'. These blundering idiots say to

themselves, "I'll do exactly what I want to do; I don't need anyone to tell me what is right and wrong."

And to the psalmist it seems, as it does to us, that this is how the whole human race behaves. With pardonable exaggeration he cries out in despair:

there is no one who does good

---not a single one.

And not only do they do bad things through total self-interest: they seek to destroy eh helpless, with no more thought than when they are having a slice of bread.

But then the psalmist has a thought. He reminds himself, and us, that in fact there is a God:

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind.

Yes, there is a God, and he constantly watches us human beings. The psalmist brings the body of his poem to an end with a powerful, reassuring truth:

Though they frustrate the poor in their hopes,
surely the Lord is their refuge.

The **poor** crop up quite often in the Psalms: the writers are referring, of course, to people with no money, but they also picture them as representing anyone who is struggling with life, and in need of a word of encouragement and a helping hand. And one of those is the writer himself: he is in despair about this world: how can he go on living in it? Then he reminds himself: the Lord is the refuge for those of us who are in despair, who feel like giving up.

What a wonderful, comforting thought amid all the doom and gloom! What joy there is for us in this helpful

insight! Yes, we naturally despair of the way the world is going, but at the heart of the Christian message is a sure and certain hope for the future: the coming of the Kingdom of God. God longs for a deep and everlasting relationship with all his people, and through the gift of his Son he has opened the way for us to say, not only in hearts, but to the failing world at large, “There **is** a God, and he is our refuge”.

And he warns us not to be guided by our own feelings into self-interest, like those blundering idiots, and so unwittingly become part of the problem.

Let us allow these insights from Psalm 14 to sustain our spirits every day, despite what the media tell us about this world. May our pessimism turn into hope. Let us seek to be aware of the constant presence of God, our refuge. In the words of a lovely 16th-century hymn:

God be in my head and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes and in my looking;
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
God be in my heart and in my thinking;
God be at my end, and at my departing.