

Pleasures in God's Presence

Psalm 16

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Today many churches worldwide commemorate the boys and men, the girls and the women who died in the great world wars of the past century. And we think of all people who suffer and die in wars, even in our times. And all this can make us rather downcast.

In two weeks time, the month of Advent begins – that is the period of looking forward to the feast of Christmas and also to the return of Christ our Lord.

We desire for our Lord God to come again for the world's salvation from evil, sin, darkness, bloodshed.

Especially for people who face wars, who deal with fear, who are being victimised by ugly events, who have to drink the cup of sorrows, Advent is an antidote against pessimism. It focusses on the hope we have as children of God and as followers of Jesus Christ.

Today we look at Psalm 16, and how King David waited for the coming of God, to save him from his enemies.

David was often surrounded by problems and enemies; how could he persevere in the midst of all that? How can we persevere in our troubles?

David sung

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16.11)

This verse will be our guide today. In the midst of our daily stress, we can experience

- 1) pleasures at God's right hand,
- 2) presence of God, while we walk on the
- 3) path of life.

1. Eternal pleasures

First, David praises his Lord that He gives him eternal pleasures. Ours life today can be marked by pleasure, by joy.



This is remarkable, because the circumstances of David were not easy. At the time when he wrote this song, David had to pray for his safety.

In his prayer he speaks of people who run after other gods in his land – and he is fully decided to not worship those gods. This suggests that this was really a major issue. Pagan religion was everywhere.

And David was also facing death. This is why he prayed:

My flesh also dwells secure.
For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption. (Psalm 16.9-10)

David has to face serious enemies; he was embroiled in civil war. There was the real possibility of death, but his heart was joyful.

Paganism around us, problems that you face, health issues, they do not have to make you permanently negative and downcast.



What is the secret of these pleasures David speaks about? The central answer is that David speaks of eternal pleasures. pleasures forevermore.

The confidence and joy of King David was not natural; it was supernatural. It had to do with eternity and with God. He looked beyond this life for his confidence, security, and joy.

This is not cheap comfort, but a reality that is very comforting when life seems to only have bad things in store. David found his joy in God.

The manner in which David describes this trust in God was so unique, that both St Peter and St Paul saw in these words of David – that God would not abandon him to the grave and that his body would not decay - a reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

St Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, just weeks after Jesus had risen from the death:

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, (and now Peter quotes from Psalm 16)
my flesh also will dwell in hope.
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

So Peter quotes here from Psalm 16, and he argues:

“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. (Acts 2.24-31)

There are more reasons in this Psalm to look beyond David for truly understanding its meaning. In verse 8 we read that David says that he will not be shaken, because God is at his right hand. The right hand is the place of honour.

Strangely, in verse 11, David says that he himself is at the right hand of God when he enjoys eternal pleasures. David has the place of honour now!

Many Church Fathers saw this as a sign that David is here really speaking through the Holy Spirit about his posterity, Jesus Christ, the true King.

So what now? Is this Psalm about Jesus Christ, or about David?

Actually, because it is about the Jesus Christ it also has value for us, because as Christians we are part of Jesus Christ.

It is only thanks to the coming of our Lord, who became a human being, who died for us, who rose from the dead, that the way to God is open for us.

This is the very reason why we can also rejoice in the eternal pleasures at God's right hand! That is why we can also with confidence say that the grave is not our final stop.

That is why our heart can be glad, even today, irrespective of our circumstances. Death does not have the last word.

2. Presence of God

True joy is linked to the presence of God. ‘You will fill me with joy in your presence’, says David. And the eternal pleasures he wrote about, are also ‘in the presence of God, at his right hand.’

All good things we desire, are related to God himself. And all true joy in life today is related to God.

Do not think, that this presence of God is only a matter for eternity, for later, or that we can only rejoice in God when we are in heaven.

There are lots of things in life to rejoice about. And much of the real joy in life is actually because God gives us this life to enjoy. Nature. People. Music. Good food. You fill it in. God is the one who gives life to us as a wonderful present.

But the joys in life are only truly enjoyable when we realise, through faith, that they are all God given and all connected with eternity. The presence of God makes all joys that He created for all people extra joyful.

And I think that all these minor joys in life, even when many in life can be miserable, all these minor joys, if seen in the light of God, make our life truly joyful.

The writer of the Psalm does not only look forward to eternity for his satisfaction in life; he is also deeply joyful about his present state, now. Today. Even though he is embroiled in civil war and his life is in danger.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Psalm 16.5-6)

David thanks God for his inheritance in the land of Israel. For the land he owns.

But actually, I think David only really enjoys what he has, because He also confesses. 'Lord, apart from you, I have no good thing.' (Psalm 16.2)

Not the land, not his palace, not his money, not his security in this life, was what David desired. All that was great - but could be lost. So his ultimate joy was in God himself.

St Augustine, in one of his sermons (Sermons 334.3) on Psalm 16, said:

[David is saying.] O Lord, why give me some other inheritance? Whatever you give, it isn't worth much. You be my inheritance; I love you. I love you with all my soul, with all my mind I love you. What can it mean to me, anything you give me apart from yourself?

We will one day experience this same joy of God in its fullness when we are united with him. But today we can already have a foretaste of this love and peace and joy. Even when the storms of life blow around us. If we look at God's presence in all things.

3. Path of life

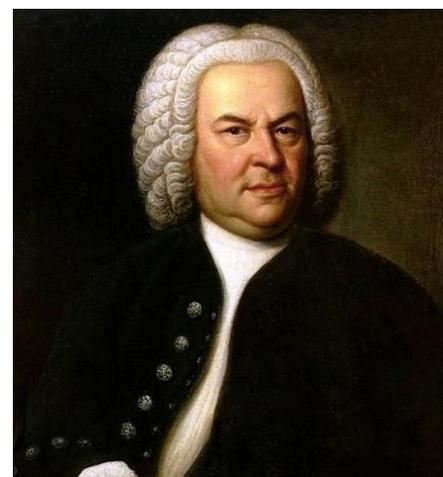
How can we already be with God and enjoy this foretaste of the eternal pleasures that are with him? David says in his Psalm that God has made known to him the path of life – the path of God. David hands us some secrets.

First, he begins with taking refuge in God, because nothing else on earth is good compared to the Goodness of God.

St Teresa of Avilla, in one of her poems (Poems, 30) said. "He who has God wants for nothing. God alone is enough."

Our satisfaction can only come from the giver, not from his gifts. If you see God behind all these gifts, you truly enjoy them as His gift to you. To say it simply, Bach sounds better if you know the God Bach was inspired by.

Secondly, David also enjoys all those people who have a similar desire for God. Desiring God creates community with others who have a similar desire.



“I say of the holy people who are in the land, “They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.” (Psalm 16.3)

It is this community of the saints where we experience a foretaste of the eternal joys that God is offering to us. Our Christian community is Gods creation; it is a reflection of the community that exists in God himself.

The third secret of David we read in Psalm 16.7-8:

I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel,
and in the night watches he instructs my heart.
I have set the Lord always before me.

David’s desire is for God, his community is with the people of God, and in that context, he also listens to God for obeying him.

David seems to speak here of a systematic lifestyle. Even in dark moments, in the midst of fear and strife, in the night, God is able to speak to David, because he sets God always before him.

He seeks God. David envisions God. He makes sure he does not forget. And He seeks Him for knowing how to live.

Is this hard? It is not easy. Sure. To set the Lord always before us. That is an act of the will. It demands our whole heart, our full mind, all of our strength.

But is that not how our Lord Jesus told us to love God? With complete singlemindedness? With all of our life? This is our normal behaviour, as children of God, our Father.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist ‘Prince of Preachers’ from the 19th century, in his commentary on Psalm 16, links the psalm even with holy eucharist.

We inherit, by virtue of our joint heirship with Jesus, all the riches of the covenant of grace; and the portion which falls to us sets upon our table the bread of heaven and the new wine of the kingdom.

Who would not be satisfied with such refined diet? Our shallow cup of sorrow we may well drain with resignation, since the deep cup of love stands side by side with it, and will never be empty.

Conclusion

So love and desire God alone; enjoy the community of His people; set Him before you every day to follow Him.

And as we celebrate Holy Eucharist now, let his cup of love make the cup of life, the cup of sorrows that we have to drink, bearable and may it give you joy.

God himself is with you to quench your thirst.

+ Amen