**No to us but to God be all glory** 22/9/24 dkm md pm

Read: Psalm 115, Isaiah 44:9-20

Text: Psalm 115

Psalms: 89:7-18, 135:13-21, 62:5-12, 115:1-2

Whenever we start thinking we have done something wonderful and praiseworthy, it is good to remember the first verse of Psalm 115: ‘Not to us, O Lord, not unto us, but to your name give glory’. In my second year at University, I got very good marks and topped the class; I am not boasting because it was over fifty years ago! Besides, at that time the Lord put this verse into my mind, and I remember it to this day.

I have read of others, like King Henry V, who took this verse to heart when, although vastly outnumbered, he defeated the French at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. He had his soldiers kneel in the mud and sing this verse- as portrayed in Shakespeare’s play, ‘Henry V’: ‘O God thy arm was here; and not to us but to thy arm alone, ascribe we all’. We often sing Psalm 117 as a doxology- perhaps we could sing Psalm 115:1 also?

Psalm 115 is number three of the six Egyptian Hallel Psalms which were sung at Passover. The previous psalm referred to the Lord bringing Israel out of Egypt, and some scholars link these two psalms. Yet most think this psalm refers to the return from exile in Babylon where the people of God lived among idol worshippers. But the Egyptians were also idol worshippers, and the Exodus was as victory over the gods of Egypt as well as Pharoah.

Scholars also see this psalm as antiphonal, a back-and-forth response by two or more groups. There are signs of this in this psalm, with a call to Israel to trust in the Lord being followed by, ‘The Lord has been mindful of us’ and then, ‘May the Lord give you increase’ (115:9,12,14). But we cannot be certain of just how it was sung. In the NT church it was probably sung as we sing it. Jesus and his disciples probably sang a Hallel psalm at the Last Supper (Mat 26:30). We will look at Psalm 115 under five subheadings.

**1.To God be all glory**

It is natural for men and women, for us, to want praise and glory. If you are into sport, you want an Olympic medal; you probably have trophies already. We give awards in sport, in school, and in business, but not in church, you may have noticed, although some churches make honour boards according to how much members give! Jesus says not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing and warns against seeking glory from men (Mat 6:3). Whatever we have to give is given to us by the Lord, and whatever talent we have is given by the Lord: ‘Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above’ or from God (Ja 1:17).

Seeking praise from men rather than God is an outcome of the Fall. We are born in sin and cut off from God, and being without God we are without hope in this world (Eph 2:12). All we have is ourselves, alone in the world. We must determine our own destiny and seek the praise of other people. We do not talk about seeking the praise and glory of other people, preferring to talk about ‘affirmation’ and ‘self-esteem’. A media report about people who have attempted suicide spoke of people having ‘low self-esteem’, but they were high achievers suffering from high self-esteem- sporting heroes, prominent politicians and the like. They became depressed when they were no longer in the news every day!

Some people find a sense of self-worth in helping others, which is good, but true self-worth comes from the realisation that we have no self-worth apart for Jesus. It is the Lord who calls us and makes us special and says he will never leave us or forsake us, after we have repented of our sin before him and trust in him for everything is this world and the next. We give all glory to God for his steadfast love and faithfulness (115:1). God has set his love upon us just as he did upon the people of Israel down in Egypt. We were helpless and hopeless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9:36). The Lord in his mercy, and in his covenant love, called us to himself and made us special. He knows his sheep by name, and they know him.

If God loves you as he says he does, why do you doubt him? Why do you listen to bullies and people who hate you? O that every young person, and old person for that matter, would know the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord and not even contemplate self-harm because of what people say. Remember, you are completely unworthy, totally depraved as our Confession says, but God in his mercy will lift you up to sit with Christ in heavenly places (Eph2:6). Our Confession or Catechism reminds us of verse 1 of this psalm when it tells us, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’.

**2.Those who make them are like them**

The early Christians were condemned by the Romans for being atheists! Why? Because they did not worship any image or idol! Hindus find it strange that Christians, true Christians, do not worship any idol. They identify Christians through the sign of baptism, or sometimes by their refusal to bow to a Hindu idol. I say ‘true Christians’ because we know Roman Catholics make carved images, contrary to the second commandment. They say this helps ‘simple’ folk in worship, but Hindus see these images as being like the idols they worship.

The nation of Israel did not make any image of God because any such image would be a lie, and because it would violate the second commandment. The time they took the Ark of the Covenant into battle because other nations marched out with their gods, it ended in disaster (1Sam 4:4); God would not have people carting him around! On other occasions the king started making and worshipping idols to be like other nations. The pressure is still upon us today to have some visible representation of God.

In this psalm the people of God had no image and no idol, so other nations mocked them saying, ‘Where is your God?’ This only happened when Isarel was defeated of course, as in the time of Hezekiah (2Kings 18:35), and in Babylon. Such mocking was not a call for Isarel to start making idols like other nations; it was a call for them to declare, ‘But our God is in heaven; he does whatever he pleases’ (115:3). What an amazing declaration! When pagans point to us and say, ‘Where is your God?’, and mock us saying, ‘I don’t see your God; have I bumped into him?’ we say, ‘Our God is the creator of this world. He cannot be confined to, or by, anything we make’.

‘God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable’ (Shorter Catechism Q4). Yes, he came down in the form of a man, in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son, but never can he be represented in a lump of metal, stone or wood, however big or small. This infinite and eternal God is in heaven, but this does not mean he has nothing to do with this world. All the nations are under his sovereign power and rule. He does whatever pleases him and no man stop him (115:3); Pharaoh tried and failed, and still today rulers and even ordinary people shake their fists at God- but ‘he does whatever he pleases’!

The psalm goes on to mock the idols that people make and worship. It is not mocking the people as such, although the words, ‘those who make them are like them’ point out their ignorance, and the effect this has on their life. Isaiah similarly mocks the making of idols, pointing out that from a tree man carves an image and burns the rest of the log to keep warm (Isa 44:15). True knowledge and wisdom come from God so without God knowledge and wisdom will not be true. ‘A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel’ (Prov 12:10). So beware of what some ‘experts’ in our universities say! ‘They do not know nor understand; for He has shut their eyes, so that cannot see’ (Isa 44:18).

Hindu students at the college where I taught made a huge statue of Saraswati, the goddess of education, and worshipped this idol for a few days. They then commandeered a truck, bundled their god into the back of this truck, drove to the river and dumped it in. The idol could not swim of course, so that was the end of their god- until they made another! This psalm, more than any other, tells the obvious facts about lifeless, man-made gods. Yet in 1995 millions of Hindus were convinced that white marble idols of Ganesh were drinking their milk offering. Lots of ignorant Roman Catholics are similarly convinced by stories of weeping statues of Mary. Even pagans in our society laugh at such foolishness, but you would be surprised how superstitious many are. Many see politicians, doctors, or themselves, as gods, and get dismayed when these ‘gods’ fail to deliver or save them. Our God is in the heaven, and he alone is powerful to save. Is this the God in whom you trust?

**3.Trust in the Lord**

Idols of gold, stone, wood or plastic are useless when it comes to helping or protecting us. We can decorate them will all our might and imagination, but they remain mute and motionless. We might have sophisticated machines and computers, but take out the battery and they die! And when it comes to saving us from death, they are silent and powerless.

A Levitical choir or some other group calls upon Isarel to, ‘Trust in the Lord, he is their help and shield’ (115:9). These words of exhortation are addressed to Israel, to the house of Aaron or house of priests, and to ‘you who fear the Lord’. The latter may be proselytes or ‘God-fearers’ but all who belong to the Lord must fear or reverence the Lord.

The question arises: Do you fear or reverence the Lord? Do you trust in the Lord, or do you only turn to the Lord when all else fails, when you cannot help yourself? ‘Trust in the Lord’ refers to a way of life. Trust in the Lord refers to worshipping the Lord whenever his people gather for worship. Trust in the Lord refers to giving him thanks and praise, and all the glory (115;1). Trust in the Lord means believing with all your heart that he will help you, that he will provide for you, heal all your diseases and forgive all your sin (Ps 103:3). Trust in the Lord means having the Lord as your shield to protect you from the fiery darts of the devil and evil people. Jesus is your shepherd, the true and faithful shepherd of the flock of God. Do you come to Jesus when you are in need or when you feel threatened? You will if you truly trust in the Lord.

**4. The Lord bless you and give you increase**

The people may have been facing taunts from another nation regarding their invisible God, from people who boasted in their beautiful or hideous idols, as the case may be. But these idols were nothing, just lifeless lumps of wood or stone. We cannot have a personal relationship with such a god, and such a god cannot help us. This understanding leads to the response and blessing in verses 12-15. This may be from the people, although only priests declared diving blessings.

The Lord does not forget his people. He remembers his covenant love even if we forget. And when he remembers he blesses us. The same threefold reference to Israel, Aaron, and those who fear the Lord trusting in the Lord, is now a threefold reference to the blessing of the Lord (115:12,13). This blessing is for small and great alike. It is not according to our judgment but the judgment and grace of the Lord. Young and old from all levels in society are blessed. Families are blessed because the Lord made families and loves covenant families. There is no small or great in the family of God. We are all one in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The blessing of God is detailed as, ‘the Lord give you increase’ (115:14,15). The Lord made families and loves families, as we just said. He blesses families with ‘increase’, a broad term because his blessings are broad. We can plant and we can water, but remember it is, ‘God who gives the increase’ (1Cor 3:6). The Lord blesses families with children (Gen 1:28, Deut 1:10,11). More ‘godly offspring’ means more honour and glory to the Lord (115:17). Increase also refers to farm animals and to more yield from your field. The God who made heaven and earth is powerful to bless in these terms, and he will do so as we look to him as our help and shield (Deut 28:4). We dare not look to our idols or to ourselves for such blessing. We don’t want to be like the self-made man who worships his maker!

**5. All praise and glory to the Lord**

The closing verses of this psalm are words of praise, words like the first giving all glory to the Lord. The Lord made heaven and earth, so they are his, although the earth he has given to man to manage for our good and his glory (115:16); he not given us the earth to exploit and destroy, any more than he has given it, or the things of the earth, for us to worship. We are not to worship the heavens or the things in the heavens either, because these were created by God and belong to him. Worship of the sun and the heavens is a feature of many religions including, indirectly, our own secular humanism.

The Lord who gives us life wants us to thank and praise him all the days of our life. Because sin and death came into the world, we all die and end up silent in the grave (115:17). So let us praise and glorify our amazing and gracious God while ever we have breath. Through belief in Jesus Christ, we are born again into eternal life and will be praising God in heaven, but if we are not praising him here on earth we will not be doing so in heaven.