**Psalm 73**

**God is good**

Ah, the **Good Old Days**.

 When the **summers** were long and forever sunny.

 When you could still see **bobbies on the beat**.

 When **the pound in your pocket** crinkled instead of jingled.

 When families **ate meals together** without a mobile phone in sight.

 My Dad remembered when a morning’s fun during the summer holidays was running down to the **main road at Scorrier** and counting the passing cars. On a good day, you could get up to double figures in a morning!

 Mind you, I don’t think it was all so great. Those wonderful days were back before the discovery of **antibiotics** and so much of what is now everyday medicine.

And even I can remember back to when **the dentist’s chair** was something seriously to be feared, the drills were slow, and anaesthetics were for wimps.

But I think that, for me, one of the things that speaks of those bygone days are **church harvest festivals**.

Even when I first became a Christian, back in the 1970’s, some people were starting to ask if those times when the church is suddenly filled with flowers and little twisted wheat stalk ornaments, and there is that **central display** of marrows and beans and cabbages and apples and maybe jam and honey - but certainly no packets of anything bought in a supermarket … and you always had to have a lump of coal, too …

Even then, most people were *not* workers on the land. So wouldn’t a *trades* festival be more relevant than a *harvest* festival, some dangerous revolutionaries were asking. Goodness knows what it might have looked like, a display of typewriters and chisels and other tools and stuff that people used to earn their living. I guess I could have brought some test tubes - or round-bottomed flasks, more likely. I don’t really think I can see it catching on, even if it’s a more realistic expression of the general population’s working life.

But the general intention could have been the same. An annual reminder that

**God is good**

An annual celebration that God is good. An annual time to specifically give thanks to God for his goodness. Just like you get in the psalms:

***Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!***

(Psalms 106:1)

***Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble ...***

(Psalms 107:1-2)

***Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”***

(Psalms 118:1-2)

And one further psalm really takes this to heart, with that last phrase repeated in every one of 26 verses:

***Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever; ...***

(Psalms 136:1-3)

And in very simple terms, that’s what we’re here doing today. “Giving thanks to the LORD, for he is good”.

And yet life is not *always* that simple, if we’re honest, is it? That’s why we read together Psalm 73 earlier on. That is a very honest, very identifiable-with bit of writing, wouldn’t you say? When you read it, don’t you walk alongside the writer as he recounts how *he* has thought? How he nearly tripped up in his thinking, actually:

***But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.***

(Psalms 73:2)

But God rescued him, I think we’re meant to take this to imply. This morning, I’d like us to walk with Asaph through his psalm, and then take a while to try to apply this very simple phrase, *God is good*, in four areas of life where many of us, I suspect, don’t always find it very simple at all to hold onto it and believe. Don’t neglect even the very first word. It is a token of the mental struggle Asaph has gone through.

***A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.***

(Psalms 73:1)

*Truly*, he says. Don’t be blase about this. Don’t think this is just a cheap, trite affirmation that I’m just saying pretty much in my sleep. Actually, I nearly sleepwalked into a kind of spiritual death here, on this very point. I nearly gave up on the very infusion of life that I most need every day. *But now I see!* And I’m therefore saying this to you *emphatically* and *enthusiastically*. *TRULY!* God is good! He *is* good. He has been good to *me*.

How do I now know this with such clarity? Read on. Let’s put our feet into Asaph’s **footsteps into the dark**.

***But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.***

(Psalms 73:2)

 What kind of dangers are we talking about? The ***did it have to be snakes?*** kind of danger? No, it’s something far more deadly, to the soul rather than just to the body. A false understanding of God, a false understanding of himself, and a false understanding of the world around us. He started growing envious.

 ***For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.***

(Psalms 73:3-4)

 Let’s face it, isn’t that precisely what is presented to us nowadays with the modern celebrity culture? All these beautiful people! Just see what their money gets them! Almost anything they want.

 ***They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.***

(Psalms 73:5)

 They start to think of themselves as people apart, people worth more than those around them. So they throw their financial weight and influence around. And spend money with no understanding of its real value - or how much good it could do.

 ***Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.***

(Psalms 73:6-7)

 They start to overestimate their own importance. They start to say things that just should not be said. It’s as if they start to think of themselves as little gods.

 ***They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.***

(Psalms 73:8-9)

 And *other* people start to believe it, too. They have a following - even including people who ought to know a lot better. Even before the days of Twitter!

 ***Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them.***

(Psalms 73:10)

 And they seem to think that they are somehow beyond even God’s reach. If he even exists, that is. If he is even bothered. If those things that people used to believe in were ever actually true. Well, who cares nowadays?

 ***And they say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”***

(Psalms 73:11)

 And now Asaph turns to us, daring us to disagree. *Aren’t I right?*

 ***Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.***

(Psalms 73:12)

 And that could indeed be precisely how life seems to be to us, too. Whether you’re thinking about drug barons or celebs or dodgy politicians … or just your small-town equivalents, the petty thieves and thugs and general crooks, the local business people who always manage to get planning permission for their developments. All these people who seem to be forever cutting corners and flouting the rules … they *get away with it!*

 Look, this is now an entirely pragmatic argument. They get away with it. I keep the rules, they break them … and it’s *me* still pootling along in the slow lane as they flash past in **their new flashy Porsche**.

 So what’s the point?

 ***All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.***

(Psalms 73:13)

 It’s “all in vain”. Or I have actually suffered. I wondered about the “every morning” phrase in this next verse.

 ***For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.***

(Psalms 73:14)

 It’s a bit contradictory, following on from “all the day long”, but this is just anger and resentment overflowing - so don’t expect it to be totally coherent. But could it just have been an allusion to reading the Scriptures every day - every *morning*, perhaps, the “quiet time” to start the day?

 Sometimes those Scriptures will encourage you. And sometimes they will call you to account. Your conscience will be pricked by God’s word. There may be things to confess - things that you have to admit, in the light of a new day, that you have to repent of, or even repent of *again*.

 And yet … those carefree pagans just carry on as if they don’t have a care in the world. I’m here feeling chastened by the Scriptures at the same moment that *they* take their first **dive into their private pool**.

 And yet … another *and yet* … Asaph still knows that although he *has* these feelings, just venting them - just “being authentic”, as people would try to justify it, nowadays, isn’t good.

 ***If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed the generation of your children.***

(Psalms 73:15)

 Folks, can I just suggest that we need to handle our emotions with care. Just because you honestly *do* feel something doesn’t mean to say you’re *right* to feel it, or wise to talk about it openly. Your rancour can contaminate someone else’s soul, too.

 There are some things that we can honestly admit that we feel, but at the same time state that we know we need to set ourselves against, and fight against, feelings that we have to try to choke to death before they choke *us* to death. It may feel great to have a good old rant about someone or something … but you might just be working poison into your wound … and contaminating people nearby, too.

 And yet, we also know that tackling these big questions of life is *hard*. Those things that puzzle us, and confound us, and sometimes totally floor us … When some of these uncomfortable truths about the world around us hit us hard, we can feel as if we’ve been gutted and left for dead, almost. Asaph almost underplays his hand here, I think.

 ***But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ...***

(Psalms 73:16)

 When just letting rip, just shouting, maybe just swearing, you know, just letting it all hang out for once feels so good … why must I struggle so much to straighten out my thinking?

 The answer is that just venting doesn’t give you vision. **Howling at the moon** won’t bring you happiness. But there *is* another side to all of this. You might not understand everything, but the part-answers of God’s word are still far better than the frustrating heaps of questions of this world.

 Isaac Newton, I thought it was, but I was wrong - it was way further back, and Archimedes, who said something like “Give me a lever and **one solid point** as a fulcrum, and I will move the world”. Well, here is Asaph’s one solid point:

 ***Truly God is good ...***

(Psalms 73:1)

 And here are some rays of light starting to shine into his earlier darkness. Glimmers of understanding, even if not yet the full light of day.

 ***But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.***

(Psalms 73:16-17)

 And suddenly the “they” become less enviable. Read on, and “they” become more like pitiable, in the light of eternity.

 ***Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!***

(Psalms 73:18-19)

 Isn’t that just so true? We see people prospering by all manner of dodgy schemes. And maybe they do get away with it for decades. But it can all be taken from them in an instant. Or *they* can be taken from their possessions. One fool driver is all it takes. Or a clot of blood no bigger than a pea.

 It may seem that God doesn’t have his eye upon them, that he is like that poor old teacher you used to play up so much when you were back in school, and you knew he was safely looking the other way. But actually, nothing gets past this God.

 ***Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.***

(Psalms 73:20)

 And Asaph confesses that he fell for the world’s propaganda for a while. He swallowed this stuff, and it dulled his senses. There’s a lesson there!

 ***When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.***

(Psalms 73:21-22)

 But there is a but. And that is because

 ***Truly God is good ...***

(Psalms 73:1)

 What are the facts of the matter, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ? I have to put it this way, to put it into proper context. We can’t just hide behind the word “God”, and think that covers everyone. I’ll prove that to you before we move on from this psalm, don’t worry. What are the facts of the matter, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ?

 Despite my occasional lapses into spiritual stupidity …

 ***Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.***

(Psalms 73:23)

 Folks, isn’t that good, that *God* holds *your* hand, and not the other way around? Remember playing **buzzies** with your kids? You told them to hold onto you, as you started to rotate and spin them around. But you made even more sure that *you* held onto *them*. If their childish grip started to slip, *yours* still wouldn’t.

 And if you and I are holding onto Jesus Christ, it is even more fundamentally because *he* is still holding onto *you*. Isn’t that good? Isn’t *he* good?

 We’re not left to scrabble around in the dark, here and now. And we’re promised the brightest of all possible futures in Jesus Christ, too.

 ***You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.***

(Psalms 73:24)

 Isn’t that good? Isn’t *he* good?

 And when you start to view things again from that point of heavenly perspective …

 ***Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.***

(Psalms 73:25)

 Nothing comes near, nothing gets close, to the honour and privilege and delight of knowing this God of grace. If this seems like a difficult statement to make … if there’s someone or something that you find immensely desirable and pleasurable in this world … then look at it like this. If that “someone or something” is your spouse of fifty years, say … then who is the one who designed marriage to be capable of that level of glory? And who is the one who gave you that human love of your life? As the old marriage service used to conclude …

 ***“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”***

(Mark 10:9)

 Isn’t that good? Isn’t *he* good? *Everlastingly* good:

 ***My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***

(Psalms 73:26)

 And those super-successful human beings, those ones we were in danger of envying, earlier in the psalm … what’s in store for *them*, if they have chosen to live without God?

 ***For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.***

(Psalms 73:27)

 But Asaph has chosen differently. He has chosen to be blessed by the grace of a *good* God, and the *presence* of this good God.

 ***But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.***

(Psalms 73:28)

 And that’s why I said we have to specifically factor Jesus Christ into all of this. We’re not fit, of ourselves, to approach God. We wouldn’t even think of marching up to **Buckingham Palace** to see the Queen without an invitation, and we’d be told various requirements of dress code and court etiquette. *They* set the rules, not us. If *they* say No, those famous gates stay shut against us.

 So how can we draw near to God? Only because of the invitation offered to us by Jesus Christ - of which I would love to tell you more, another day. But here’s a NT summary for you. Hebrews, and chapters of argument, boiled down to this simple encouraging word:

 ***Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.***

(Hebrews 7:25)

 So when Asaph says, in that comforting last verse,

 ***But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.***

(Psalms 73:28)

 Don’t presume that that is a nice thought that just anyone can tap into, and beam yourself some peace from goodness knows where. We’re talking about specifically coming to God “through Jesus” - on account of his life and death and rising again, to deal with the sin that otherwise separates you from God, and will keep you separate from God eternally. We’re not talking about just signing up for a once-off dose of comfort, like taking a pain-killer tablet when you’re running a toothache. Instead it is a whole life-long whole-life turn around. It’s a place of spiritual residence for all time, not just a drive-through when you need a boost.

 So Asaph has reminded himself - re-convinced himself - of that basic fact:

 ***Truly God is good ...***

(Psalms 73:1)

 Folks, I think we need to do this at times as well. Because there are times when we are confronted with stuff in this world that will make us doubt it - just as Asaph was knocked off course for a while. Before we finish, I just want to run some of these past you. Do these sometimes trouble *you*, and lead *you* to start doubting?

 What about **disappointment**?

 We’ve probably all had some of this in the last few months, with the Virus and the Lockdown. Everybody’s plans have been affected. It could have been education plans. It could have been holiday plans, time with the family … or time *away* from them. But we have all encountered disappointment at some time or other. And it can be tempting to think that, *Well, if God really cares for me, doesn’t he want me happy?*

What about something bigger than just personal disappointment, what about **disaster**?

If you are of a certain age, you’ll remember the **twin towers**. The whole world seemed to stop that Tuesday afternoon in September 2001. If you go back a bit further, you’ll remember **Aberfan**, and the black river of coal slurry that poured down a hill and obliterated a school.

Or just look around the world today. Over 100,000 fatalities to Coronavirus in **Brazil**. We have to admit it, when things like this stack up, aren’t we tempted to doubt whether God is good … or maybe we go the other way, and doubt whether he is *able* to do anything about things like this.

Or if this isn’t enough, what about just **decay**, generally? There’s that line from the hymn

*Change and decay in all around I see*

 Now I think that’s a bit of a shame, putting change so close to decay, as if all change were evil. I know some of you are tempted to think that way, but I have to insist it is not the case. After all, *God* is in the business of changing people!

And change is mostly good and exciting when you’re young. But what about when most changes are for the worse? When your life is progressively marked by what you can *no longer* do? You’ve got that so cleverly laid out for us in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, when the various aspects of physical decline are alluded to.

***Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ... in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, ...***

(Ecclesiastes 12:1,3)

Be honest. Doesn’t it seem difficult at times to still believe that *God is good* … when those joints are aching yet again?

And finally, of course, that biggest D of all: **Death**

 How can you face that eventual tombstone - your own, or that of someone you loved - and not wonder about whether, actually, if God’s world includes that … is he really totally good? Could there not have been some other less painful way?

 Folks, *expect* those questions to be hard. Asaph found them hard too!

 ***But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ...***

(Psalms 73:16)

 We may have to drag our thoughts away from the disappointment or the disasters or the decay or the death that shouts in our ears, clamouring for our attention. It will be hard going. But see where Asaph insists he will focus.

 **… *until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.***

(Psalms 73:17)

 I’m not saying a church building. Our is obviously far too empty right now … and cooling down ready for the winter, too. Don’t tie yourself too greatly to the literals of the OT. In the NT, God’s “building” is his *people*. So think the *people* of God, other believers. Think the *word* of God, where God reveals himself and ourselves and the world around us for our understanding.

 And think supremely about Jesus Christ, and his cross. *That* is the fulcrum, the secure fixed point, around which you can move this world.

 Asaph took us to a vantage point from which he could see not just this world, but enough of the next to make a different kind of sense of what we see around us. Those evil people who seem to be prospering, that’s not how it *really* is. *Really*, they are far from secure.

 ***Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.***

(Psalms 73:18)

 And when you consider, from that vantage point of the cross of Christ, words like this:

 ***By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, ...***

(1 John 3:16)

***Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.***

(John 13:1)

 *Then* we will be more able to perceive and to keep in mind that *truly* …

 ***Truly God is good ...***

(Psalms 73:1)

 Not first of all now to the old, literal Israel, but to the *new* Israel, people like you and me who have put our trust in Jesus Christ.

 And, on that basis, I want to invite *you* this morning to

 ***Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!***

(Psalms 34:8)