

Sermon on Wednesday 11 November 2020

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Reassurance in a storm

When I was a student, in September of my second year, I went on a college field trip to Belgium as part of our European Studies course. I enjoyed Belgium for its beer and baroque buildings and mayonnaise on chips, which I'd never experienced before.

Anyway, coming home at the end of the week, we boarded the ferry at Zeebrugge and set sail on an overnight passage to Dover. Unfortunately, a storm blew up in the Channel and the boat started to pitch and lurch in choppy waters; we tried to get into the port of Dover, but hit the harbour wall and had to return to the open sea to ride out the storm. It was a ferocious night and quite scary. We took on board the passengers from a small boat that was sinking alongside the ferry and I heard later that 19 people died that night.

At the height of the tempest, I was sitting in the ferry lounge with a group of friends when one of the cabin crew came up and said: "Don't worry, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore we should not be afraid."

My friends and I looked at each other and thought he must have been working behind the bar. We thought he was bonkers. It was only a few weeks later, at a Remembrance Sunday Service, that I realised this well-meaning bar steward had been paraphrasing Psalm 46, which we have just heard.

Incidentally, we got into port the next morning and everyone was safe. As Psalm 46 says, 'God will help us when the morning dawns'.

Psalm 46 - what a powerful text that is. It will be very familiar to most of us, particularly the opening lines: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble'.

This psalm is included in Jewish, Catholic, Anglican and Protestant liturgies, where it is often referred to as the 'song of holy confidence'. It is also known as 'Luther's Psalm', as Martin Luther wrote his hymn 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' based on the psalm.

This psalm has been the inspiration for several musical pieces, both ancient and contemporary. And US President Barack Obama referenced the psalm in several speeches, notably his speech on the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in New York, when, incidentally, Joe Biden, a devout Christian, was Deputy President.

The psalm is often recited as a prayer for the end of all wars... which is why we hear it today on 11th November, the anniversary of the Armistice signing in 1918 and the day when we remember all those who have fallen in conflicts since then. It is a psalm that has brought hope and strength to the generations who fought through two world wars.

But Psalm 46 is not owned exclusively by those at war or in a conflict. It applies to anyone facing a challenge, anyone who is afraid; anyone in need of comfort or reassurance. I have heard it quoted several times during the past 12 months as we have faced up to coronavirus. It was appropriate in Lockdown 1; it is appropriate in Lockdown 2.

As we remember those who have fallen in battle, those who have had their lives shattered by circumstances not of their making, those who are suffering in wars today, those who are anxious about the world, Psalm 46 reminds us that, through everything that we experience, God is in control.

If you get a chance today, I urge you to read Psalm 46 again.

There are still wars today because human beings never learn. Yes, there is evil in this world. There is persecution, oppression, cruelty and abuse. There is sickness and pain. But Psalm 46 reminds us that God will ultimately triumph, as Jesus did on the Cross.

Amen

